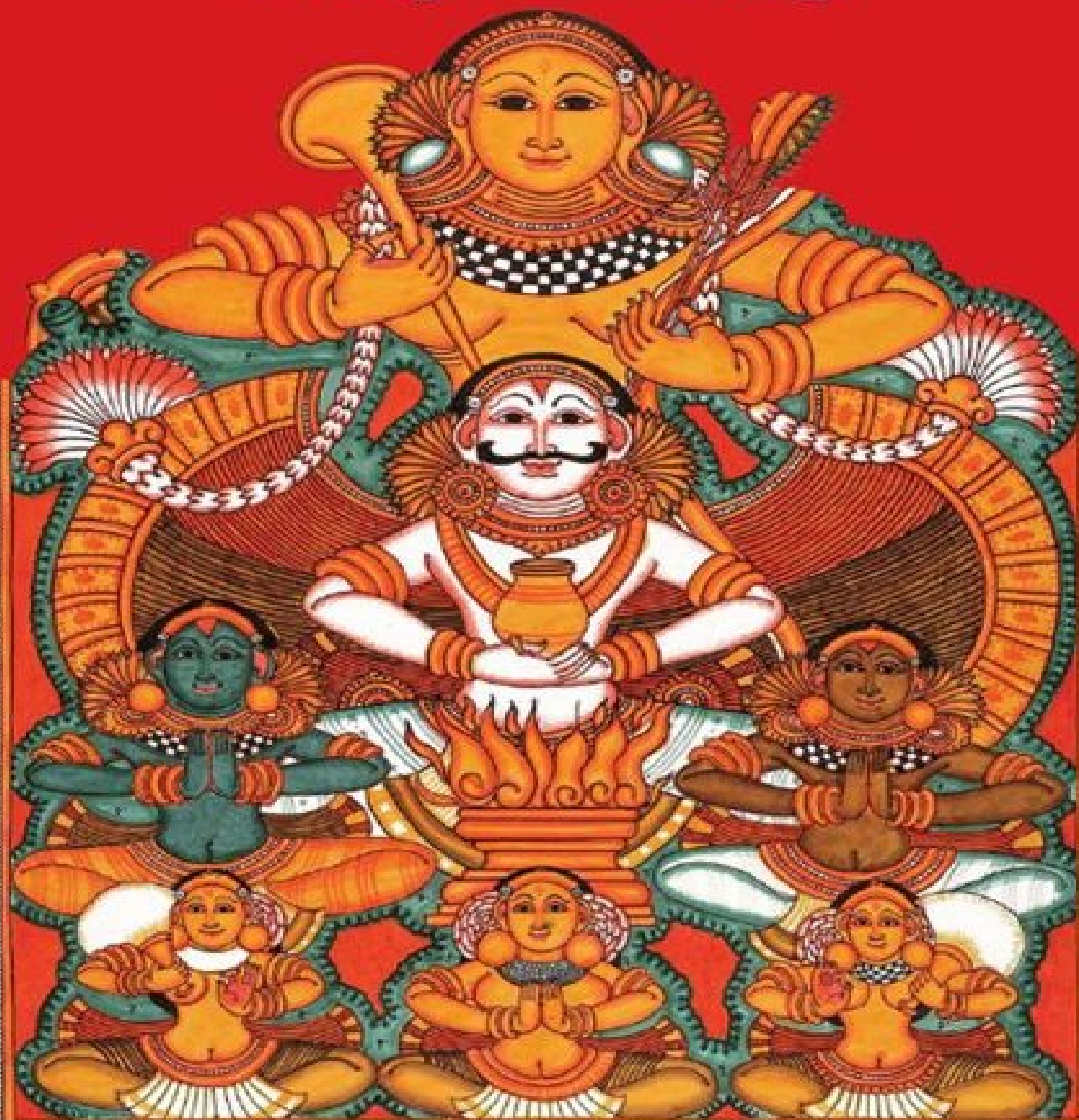




DEV DUTT PATTANAIK

The Pregnant King





Penguin

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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THE PREGNANT KING

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Devdutt's books include *Shiva: An Introduction* (VFS, India), *Vishnu: An Introduction* (VFS, India), *Devi: An Introduction* (VFS, India), *Hanuman: An Introduction* (VFS, India), *Lakshmi: An Introduction* (VFS, India), *Goddesses in India: Five Faces of the Eternal Feminine* (Inner Traditions, USA), *Indian Mythology: Stories, Symbols and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent* (Inner Traditions, USA), *Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore* (Haworth Publications, USA), *Shiva to Shankara: Decoding the Phallic Symbol* (Indus Source, India), and *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology* (Penguin, India). *The Book of Kali* (Penguin, India) is based on his talks.

The unconventional approach and engaging style evident in Devdutt's lectures, books and articles also extends to this, his first work of fiction. Devdutt is based in Mumbai. To know more visit www.devdutt.com

Key Characters

Yuvanashva, the pregnant king

- his great grandfather, Chandrasena
- his grandfather, Pruthalashva
- his father, Prasenajit
- his mother, Shilavati, princess of Avanti
- his first wife, Simantini, princess of Udra
- his second wife, Pulomi, princess of Vanga
- his third wife, Keshini, the potter's daughter
- his first son, Mandhata
- his second son, Jayanta
- his teacher, Mandavya
- his friend, Vipula, son of Mandavya
- his doctor, Asanga, son of Matanga
- his sorcerers, the Siddhas, Yaja and Upayaja
- his foster children, the ghosts, Sumedha and Somvati
- his daughter-in-law, Mandhata's wife, Amba
- his daughter-in-law's mother, Hiranyavarni
- his daughter-in-law's father, Shikhandi
- his daughter-in-law's aunt, Draupadi

Chronology of Events

<i>In the Mahabharata</i>	<i>In this story</i>
Pandavas and Kauravas, the Kuru princes of Hastina-puri, defeat Drupada, king of Panchala, and give one half of his kingdom to their teacher, Drona	Birth of Prasenajit, prince of Vallabhi
Drupada gets his son, Shikhandi, married to Hiranyavarni, princess of Dasharni	Prasenajit marries Shilavati, princess of Avanti
Pandavas marry Drupada's daughter, Draupadi, and demand from the Kauravas one half of their inheritance on which they establish the kingdom of Indra-prastha	Shilavati gives birth to Yuvanashva
Kauravas defeat Pandavas in a gambling match and send them into exile in the forest for thirteen years	Yuvanashva's first marriage
After the priod of exile, Kauravas refuse to part with Pandava lands and wage war against them at Kuru-kshetra	Yuvanashva invites Yaja and Upayaja to conduct a yagna
Birth of Parikshit, grandson of the Pandavas	Birth of Mandhata
Renunciation of the Kuru elders	The marriage of Mandhata

Prologue



They came like ants to honey. Warriors. Hundreds of warriors. Every self-respecting Kshatriya in Ilavrita, led by conch-shell trumpets, followed by a vast retinue of servants, wearing resplendent armour, bearing mighty bows, on elephants, on chariots, on foot, through the darkest nights and the coldest days of the year, along the banks of the Ganga, the Yamuna and the Saraswati, to the misty plains of Kuru-kshetra.

They came, the young and the old, the adventurous and the inexperienced, to fight the Pandavas, or the Kauravas, or for dharma. Drupada came because he wanted to settle old scores. Shikhandi because he could not escape destiny. Some came obliged by marriage. Others because death in Kuru-kshetra guaranteed a place in Amravati, the eternal paradise of the sky-gods.

Many came for the glory. For this was no ordinary war. It would be the greatest battle ever fought over property and principle in the land of the Aryas. A battle of eighteen armies. Bards would sing of it long after the last warrior had fallen. This war would make heroes of men.

Soon banners of every king and kingdom fluttered along the horizon. Banners of Yudhishtira and Duryodhana, Bhima and Bhisma, Drona and Drupada, Karna and Arjuna. Banners from Gandhara, Kekaya, Kosala, Madra, Matsya, Panchala, Chedi, Anga, Vanga, and Kalinga.

Alas! There was no banner from Vallabhi.

Yuvanashva, the noble king of Vallabhi, son of Prasenajit, grandson of Pruthalashva, great grandson of Chandrasena, scion of the Turuvasu clan, wanted to come. 'Not for glory, not to settle any score, not out of a sense of duty either,' he clarified to the Kshatriya elders, 'but to define dharma for generations to come is why I wish to go. Long have we have argued: Who should be king? Kauravas or Pandavas? The sons of a blind elder brother, or the sons of an impotent younger brother? Men who go back on their word, or men who gamble

away their kingdom? Men for whom kingship is about inheritance, or men for whom kingship is about order? What could not be agreed by speech will now finally be settled in blood. All the kings of Ila-vrita will participate. I must too.'

Yuvanashva had raised an army, filled his quivers, fitted his chariot and unfurled his banner. He had then gone to his mother, the venerable Shilavati, to seek her permission.

Widow since the age of sixteen, Shilavati had been the regent of Vallabhi, and custodian of her son's kingdom for nearly thirty years. She sat in her audience chamber on a tiger-skin rug, dressed in undyed fabrics, no jewellery except for a necklace of gold coins and tiger claws, and a vertical line of sandal paste extending from the bridge of her nose across her forehead. She looked as imperious as ever.

Placing his head on his mother's feet, his heart full of excitement, Yuvanashva had said, 'Krishna's efforts to negotiate peace between the cousins have collapsed. The division of the Kuru clan is complete. The five Pandavas have declared war against their hundred cousins, the Kauravas. The sound of conchshells can be heard in the eight directions. It is a call to arms for every Kshatriya. This is no longer a family feud; it is a fight for civilization as we know it. Grant me permission so that I can go.'

It was then that Shilavati's affectionate hand on her son's head stilled. 'Go, if you must,' she said, her voice full of disapproval. 'Noble causes are noble indeed. But that is their story. I am interested only in yours. Should you die in Kuru-kshetra, my son, fighting for dharma, you will surely go to the realm of the Devas covered in glory. There, standing on the other side of the Vaitarni, you will find your father, your grandfather, your great grandfather and all the fathers before him. These Pitrs will ask you if you have done your duty, repaid your debt to your ancestors, fathered children through whom they hope to be reborn in the land of the living. What will be your answer then?'

Yuvanashva's heart sank. He had no answer. Thirteen years of marriage, three wives and nothing to show for it.

All dreams of a triumphant return faded in the winter mist. His mother was right: what if he died? Behind him would be an abandoned kingdom, an abandoned mother and three abandoned wives. Before him would be unhappy

ancestors, like cawing crows, refusing to let him enter the land of Yama. What would be actually achieved? Glory? Dharma?

So he took a decision. 'I will not go. Not until I father a son.'

'But this is what you have always wanted: your one chance to be like your illustrious ancestors—like Turuvasu, like Yayati, like Ila before him,' said his friend, Vipula, when Yuvanashva returned to his mahasabha, his disappointment evident. 'You could return alive, triumphant, with the courage to march to every corner of the world, be lord of the circular horizon and declare yourself Chakra-varti.'

'What kind of a Chakra-varti will I be, what kind of dharma will I establish if I let myself be driven by desire? I have a duty towards my subjects, my wives, my ancestors, and my mother,' said Yuvanashva, trying hard to convince himself.

'Can't you see what your mother is doing? You have been consecrated as king by the Brahmanas. It is your destiny, your rightful inheritance. Yet she will not let you rule because you have no children. She will not even let you fight because you have no children. Your mother has turned your masculinity against you and clings to the throne like a leech.'

Yuvanashva defended his mother, 'My mother is doing what she was brought to Vallabhi to do: rule the kingdom after becoming a widow....'

'Only until you were ready to be king,' interrupted Vipula.

'I am not ready. I am not yet father. A king must provide proof of virility before he can rule.'

'Who says so?'

'My mother says so.'

Vipula's heart went out to his friend. 'Love for your mother blinds you, my king. You could have been great. But you settle for being good.'

'I have no choice, Vipula,' said Yuvanashva, a wistful smile on his lips.

And so for eighteen days, while eighteen armies would spill blood on the plains of Kuru-kshetra, Yuvanashva would stay in Vallabhi with his wives, struggling to win a battle he had fought for a long, long time. Until he fathered a child, his mother would not let him rule Vallabhi and his ancestors would not let him cross the Vaitarni.

Book One



VALLABHI



Vallabhi was a small but prosperous kingdom that stood between Hastinapuri and Panchala on the banks of the Kalindi, a tributary of the Yamuna. It encircled the temple of Ileshwara, established long ago by Ila.

Ila was a much revered ancestor whose descendants ruled most of the kingdoms lining the banks of the Ganga, the Yamuna and the Saraswati. That is why the vast plain watered by the three great rivers was known as Ila-vrita, the enclosure of Ila's children.

Before Ila, man gazed skywards for directions and solutions. In rituals known as yagnas, altars were set up, fires lit, hymns chanted, and oblations of butter made to invoke the sky-gods known as Devas and compel them to grant divine favour.

After Ila, man's gaze became more earthbound. He was no more content to wander across the earth with his cows in search of pasture land. Goddesses known as Matrikas rose from the earth in forests, beside lakes, atop mountains and inside caves, nurturing settlements around them, demanding adoration or appeasement with flowers, food and the waving of lamps. This ritual was known as puja.

‘Let us pray to everyone,’ said Ila. ‘To the Devas who live in the sky and the Matrikas who spread themselves on the earth. Let us also pray to the Kshetrapalas who watch over villages. Let us pray to the trees and to the animals and to the rocks and the rivers. Let us pray to the Pitrs, our ancestors across the river Vaitarni. Prayer earns merit. Merit makes life predictable. Keeps away accidents and surprises.’

Brahmanas, responsible for connecting man to God, divided themselves into Ritwiks who performed yagnas, Pujaris who conducted puja and Acharyas who became teachers. Kshatriyas, responsible for organizing and protecting man, patronized the rituals that had the power to change destiny and fructify desires. Vaishyas, responsible for feeding man, provided the butter, the grain, the fruits and the flowers. Shudras built altars for the sky-gods and temples for the earth-goddesses. They wove the cloth, baked the pots, drew the metals and designed the jewels.

The most magnificent of all temples built was that of Ileshwara. It was unlike any other structure known in Ila-vrita then and since. Carved out of red sandstone, its walls, gateways and pavilions were full of images of all creatures imagined and unimaginable: gods and kings, sages and nymphs, flowers and fruits, animals and serpents, demons and the strangest of monsters. ‘An expression of the mind of God,’ said the artisans. ‘Displaying all that man can fathom and more.’ Atop its pyramidal roof was a great flag that fluttered proudly in the wind.

In front of the temple stood the palace of the Turuvasu kings of Vallabhi. To the cows grazing at a distance the palace looked like waves of thatched roofs. The mynah bird that flew over it could see the spaces created within by courtyards and bathing tanks and lotus ponds. A serpent slithering in would realize there were no clearly defined rooms in this vast structure which housed over a hundred people. There were mud walls that rose from the earth but never reached the ceiling and sheer reed curtains that hung from the roofs but never touched the floor, elaborately carved pillars, huge brass lamps that stood in the corners or in wall niches or hung from the rafters. In every room spread out on the floor were skins of tigers, leopards and deer, shot by generations of Turuvasu princes. The walls were covered with paintings of rice flour, telling tales of warring gods, flirtatious nymphs and serene sages, establishing through complex

geometrical patterns the power that draws in benevolent forces and keeps out malevolent ones.

Between the palace and the temple was the city square around which radiated the city like the discus of Vishnu, the divine king of the universe. The sacrificial halls of the Brahmanas were located close to the temple. Closer to the palace were the gymnasiums of the Kshatriyas. The cattle sheds and granaries of the Vaishyas were located next to the city gates. At the far end of the city were the workshops of the Shudras.

All through the day, in every corner of the city, one could hear women singing as they tended the kitchen gardens, put the children to sleep, pounded the grain, cooked the vegetables and waited for their fathers, brothers and sons to return home.

On one side of the city was the Kalindi on which plied many boats, some with vast sails, taking traders and pilgrims up, down and across the river. On the other side stretched the fields, the pastures, the orchards, where the city bulls were allowed to roam free. Then came the frontier marked by terrifying images of the guardian god Aiyanar, a Kshetra-pala who brandished a scimitar and rode gigantic clay horses. Beyond lay the vast forests.

Highways and pathways cut through these forests connecting Vallabhi to the other kingdoms of Ila-vrita. On these roads wandered the bards from village to village, temple to temple, singing, dancing, telling stories, entertaining all when the day's work was done. They were the guardians of Ila-vrita's history, the keepers of secrets and the carriers of gossip. Some were also spies in service of the kings. Others dreamers and riddle-makers.

'Was Ila the son of Prithu?' asked the children of Vallabhi, who chased the bards, eager to know tales of their forefathers.

Prithu, who they referred to, was the first to establish the code of culture known as varna-ashrama-dharma that gave direction to mankind and ensured harmony with nature. Pleased with this code, Vishnu gave Prithu the title of Manu, leader of the Manavas, creatures who think.

'No,' replied the bards.

'Whose son was he then?'

'Why do you presume he was a son?' asked the bards, smiling mischievously.

The children demanded an explanation. The bards chuckled, plucked the strings of their lute and distracted them with the tales of Ileshwara by whose grace the most sterile of seeds became potent and the most barren of wombs became fertile. ‘If Ileshwara wishes,’ sang the bards, ‘mangoes can grow on banyan trees and eunuchs can father sons.’

ILESHWARA BLESSES DRUPADA



The streets and squares of Vallabhi were always crowded with men who sought to be fathers and women who sought to be mothers. They poured in each month, men on full moon days and women on new moon nights, men dressed in white, women in red, men with garlands of white dhatura flowers and women with garlands of red jabakusuma flowers. Each one returned without exception a year later, with daughters on the eighth day of the waning moon or with sons on the eighth night of the waxing moon.

It was this power of Ileshwara that had drawn Drupada, king of Panchala, to Vallabhi, forty-five years before the war at Kuru-kshetra. He wanted children who would destroy the Kuru clan.

The Kuru princes of Hastina-puri, which included the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra, known as the Kauravas, and the five sons of Pandu known as the Pandavas, lived under the same roof then. They had, without provocation, swooped into Panchala like hawks, taken Drupada and his six sons hostage and released them only when Drupada had agreed to relinquish control over one half of his kingdom in favour of their teacher, Drona.

A furious and humiliated Drupada had sworn, ‘I will father a son who will kill Drona, the teacher who demanded from the Kurus one half of Panchala as his tuition fee. My son will also kill Bhisma, grand-uncle of the Kuru princes, who gave Drona employment and allowed this to happen. And I want a daughter too who will marry into the Kuru clan and divide their lands as they divided mine.’

‘So many children!’ his wife, Soudamini, had exclaimed then. ‘You will surely need the help of Vallabhi’s Ileshwara for this.’

It was a new moon night when they arrived.

The then king of Vallabhi, Pruthalashva, Yuvanashva’s grandfather, received them at the gates. He found it hard to believe that the man on the golden chariot with an ivory parasol over his head was a king. Drupada had dark circles round

his eyes, unkempt hair, unwashed clothes and foul breath. Mercifully, beside him stood Soudamini, his youngest wife, wearing gold anklets and waving a yak-tail fly whisk, both much prized symbols of royalty. 'Come to my palace, treat my house as your home,' Pruthalashva had said in keeping with the laws of hospitality.

'May I go to the temple first?' an impatient Drupada had requested.

'That is not possible,' Pruthalashva had said. 'It is new moon. Only women will be allowed to enter the shrine tonight.'

'I need but a glimpse,' Drupada had pleaded.

'Even if you enter the temple tonight, you would not see Ileshwara. You will see Ileshwari.'

'What do you mean?' Drupada had asked.

Pruthalashva had then revealed the secret rites of Ileshwara of which the kings of Vallabhi had been guardians for generations.

'On new moon nights the deity in the temple is an enchantress displaying fourteen symbols of womanhood. Red sari, unbound hair, bangles, nose-rings, pots, parrots, sugarcane. As the moon starts to wax, each symbol of womanhood is replaced by a symbol of manhood, one each day. On the first day, the unbound hair is replaced by a curled moustache. The next day the red sari gives way to a white dhoti. Then the pot is removed and the bow put in its place. Gradually, the parrot becomes the peacock, the sugarcane becomes the spear, turmeric becomes ash, so that on the full moon, when only men enter the temple, the deity is an ascetic displaying fourteen symbols of manhood. Ileshwara makes men fathers. Ileshwari makes women mothers.'

Drupada had agreed to wait in the palace while his wife visited the shrine.

Pruthalashva's queen had draped Soudamini in a red sari and had unbound her hair. After taking a dip in the temple pond, she had entered the shrine dripping wet with a garland of jabakusuma flowers in her hands. Inside the temple, Soudamini had seen the beautiful face of Ileshwari. Her face was covered with turmeric. Her earrings were shaped like dolphins. She had a diamond on her nose-ring, emeralds on her ear-rings and rubies on her toe-rings. She was adorned with armlets, bracelets and anklets. Chains of gold coins round her neck made her resplendent. In her hand, she held a pot of water and a sugarcane rich

in sap. Her large unblinking silver eyes gave Soudamini assurance, love, and the promise of motherhood.

When she emerged from the temple, Pruthalashva's queen had asked her, 'Why is your husband so impatient for a child? Does he not have six sons already?'

'They are all dead,' she had sobbed. 'Killed.'

'By the Kurus?'

'No. By their own father. They fought beside my husband when the Kuru princes challenged him to battle. But they were no match for Drona's students. My husband said they were useless. Disappointments. They could not stop the division of their father's property. So he slit their throats like a farmer who destroys diseased crops. Their mothers were discarded. I am the new field, his youngest queen, still a virgin. I am supposed to give him a better crop, children of worth, who will kill his enemies and restore his pride.'

Meanwhile, across the city square, Drupada sat alone in a courtyard within the palace. As he waited for his wife to return, the memory of Drona's words had resurfaced to sting him like lashes of a whip. 'We were once the best of friends, Drupada. Inseparable. You promised me then that you would share all your wealth with me should I ever need it. I came to you for just one cow because I realized I was so poor that my son could not distinguish milk from rice water. Instead of helping me, you humiliated me. Said that friendship exists only between equals. That I was a beggar and hence could claim only alms not friendship. I swore that day that I would be your equal. And now, thanks to my students, I am. We are masters of two halves of the same kingdom. Once I could not give my son a bowl of milk. Today, I gift him a kingdom full of cows. Remember, Drupada, henceforth your rule extends only south of the Ganga. To the north is the kingdom of my son, Ashwatthama.'

Drupada had gritted his teeth and had fixed his mind on Ileshwara. 'Some say you are Shiva, the destroyer. Help me destroy the Kurus.'

'He would rather destroy your rage.' Drupada had turned around and had found a bull talking to him. On the bull sat a man with matted hair smeared with ash holding a trident in his hand. A serpent slithered round his neck. The bull's feet did not touch the ground and the man's face radiated an ethereal glow.

'Are you Shiva?' Drupada had asked.

The man on the bull had ignored his question. His eyes were shut. He swayed as if lost in a narcotic dream. The bull had then spoken up once again. 'Shiva is the silent one. This is Shankara, the one who speaks, not as distant as Shiva. Each is different. Though still the same.'

Shankara had then spoken, his voice cold as the snow-capped northern mountains, 'You have called me and I have come. What do you want?'

'A son,' Drupada had said, 'one who will kill Drona and his patron, Bhishma. And a daughter, who will divide the house of the Kurus.'

How can that be, the bull had wondered. Drona was a Brahmana. Did Drupada want a Brahmana-killer as a son? Wasn't killing a Brahmana the greatest of misdeeds for it broke the connection between man and God? And Bhishma? All the gods knew that no man could possibly kill Bhishma. Before the bull could say anything, Shankara had said, 'So be it.'

Realizing that his master had not clarified whether he would give Drupada one son or two, or a daughter, or both son and daughter, in two bodies or in one, the bull had warned Drupada, 'Beware of what Shankara has given you. He is Nilakantha with poison trapped in his throat. He is Bhairava, lord of terror. The smoke of hemp fills his lungs. What he speaks is often muddled, difficult even for the wisest Rishi to comprehend. He could have destroyed your rage. Given you peace. But you have asked him to create children for destruction. He will do that. But not as you imagine it. There will be confusion. Blurring of boundaries. Twisting of emotions. Division of land and flesh. Splitting of desires and destinies. Yama will laugh. Kama will weep. Blood will flow. Blood of fathers and brothers and sons and friends, so much blood that the kings of the earth will, in disgust and fatigue, beg for peace. Peace that could have come much earlier, before the destruction and the bloodshed, if you had only asked Shiva to destroy your rage.'

That night, charged by the vision of Shiva on his mighty bull, Drupada had made fierce love to his wife as soon as she had returned from the temple. That very night she had become pregnant.

Drupada had returned to his half of Panchala singing songs praising Ileshwara. Ten moons later, Panchala had awoken to the sound of a child. A girl.

With trepidation, the midwives had presented the child to Drupada. He had looked at her, had smiled tenderly and had then declared proudly, 'This is the son

that Shiva promised me, the son who will kill Drona and Bhisma. I name him, Shikhandi, the peacock.'

The midwives had looked at each other and the queen not knowing how to react. With a stony face, Soudamini had looked at her newborn daughter and said, 'Yes, indeed, it is a son.' She realized that rage had made her husband mad.

Fearing the mad king, the midwife had covered the child's genitals and had announced to the world, 'Panchala's king has fathered a son.'

The Brahmanas, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras of Panchala also saw what the midwife had seen. But they all had agreed, 'Yes, yes, it is a son, a prince, an heir. Killer of all our king's enemies.'

Everyone cheered.

Amidst the celebrations, the bards sang, 'Glory to Ileshwara of Vallabhi, who is at once god and goddess, who gave Drupada the child he wanted, one capable of killing the man, who Yama says no man can kill.'

CRISIS IN VALLABHI



Fourteen years later, around the time Drupada felt Shikhandi was old enough to be given a wife, disaster struck Vallabhi. The stars revealed a great calamity that would soon befall the Turuvasu clan. King Pruthalashva's only son, Prasenajit, was to die at the age of eighteen, two years after his marriage, two months before the birth of his son. And to the dismay of Vallabhi, the king refused to take responsibility for the situation.

'I have been fettered long enough,' Pruthalashva told his guru, Mandavya. 'First by varna-dharma that forced me to be follow my father's footsteps, be king and rule Vallabhi. Then by ashrama-dharma, that compelled me to marry and father a son. Long have I waited for my son to grow up and have a son of his own so that I can leave this wretched householder's life and be a hermit, seek the true meaning of life beyond this delusion of civilization.'

Having failed to change the king's mind, Mandavya decided to consult the Rishis.

Rishis were guardians of the Veda, the body of sacred chants mouthed by Prajapati, the primal father, at the dawn of time. Transmitted orally from one generation of Rishis to another, the Veda was believed to contain great power and wisdom. But to capture its power and decipher its wisdom, the chants had to

be heard by a mind free of all prejudice. This was difficult. So the Rishis stripped themselves of all desire, stayed away from women, family and society, wandered through forests never letting anything worldly fetter their fetterless souls.

Since they had no interest in society, Rishis were often approached to solve social problems. They were incisive in their understanding and dispassionate in their advice. When Mandavya learnt that the Rishis of the Angirasa order had been spotted on the banks of the Kalindi, not far from Vallabhi, he thought it best to seek their advice on the problem facing Vallabhi.

The Angirasa were keepers of the most cryptic chants of the Veda, hence were the most revered of the Rishis. They ate what no one ate, wore what no one wore and saw what no one saw. Mandavya found them sitting on rocks under a banyan tree.

When the Angirasa saw Mandavya, his face full of worry, they sang, 'From Prajapati has come the problem. From Prajapati will come the solution.'

The Rishis were naked, their limbs covered with ash, their hair was matted, their faces radiant and eyes curious. 'Prajapati has placed the solution in your heart, Mandavya. Why does your head refuse it?' they said in unison.

A gentle wind distracted Mandavya from responding immediately. He adjusted his dhoti and his uttarya, the two pieces of unstitched cloth that every member of civilized society was obliged to wear. The dhoti was wrapped around the waist to cover the loins and the legs. The uttarya was wrapped to cover the shoulders and the chest. By the manner in which the dhoti was draped and the uttarya wrapped one could decipher a man's station in society. Mandavya was a Brahmana, an Acharya, his dhoti and uttarya worn in the style of teachers. The heavy silver anklet was an indicator of his close association with the royal family. Since he was not a performer of rituals, he had not shaved his head. His hair was long and tied into a neat knot behind his head. He had a long black beard that drew attention away from his thin sharp lips. 'I told my king that we had to find a girl, fertile and intelligent, one who will bear Prasenajit a son and who, after he is gone, will rule Vallabhi as regent, custodian of the child's inheritance.'

'And?'

The Angirasa heard the protests in Mandavya's heart.

‘A woman! How can a woman rule? It is like asking a man to bear children.’

‘Don’t let your experience impose limits on the mind of God, Mandavya,’ said the Rishis, their voices sharp. ‘The dharma of Ila-vrita may not let women do things that men do and men do things that women do but that does not mean such possibilities do not exist.’ Pointing south-west, they said, ‘Go to Avanti. You will find there a girl who has never been taught the dharma-shastras but whose understanding of dharma will put you and all the kings of Ila-vrita to shame.’

A WOMAN WITH A MAN’S HEAD



Her name was Shilavati. She was the eldest daughter of Ahuka, king of Avanti, scion of the Janaka clan, daughter of his senior queen. And she always sat behind her younger brother, Nabhaka, son of the junior queen, listening to everything their father and his bards had to say.

The bards of Avanti often narrated tales of Ila’s many sons: Pururava, who married an Apsara or river-nymph called Urvashi, angering the Gandharvas, whose music makes the waters flow; Nahusha, who so impressed the Devas with his valour that he was invited to rule Amravati, their city above the sky; Yayati, who married daughters of Asuras, residents of the dark and mysterious realm under the earth.

‘The descendents of Ila are truly illustrious. They have connected Manavas to the other children of Prajapati. Most royal families in Ila-vrita, be it the Kurus of Hastina-puri, the Yagnasenis of Panchala, the Yadavas of Mathura and the Turuvasus of Vallabhi, trace their ancestry to Ila. But not us,’ clarified Ahuka. ‘Our forefathers descend from Manu’s true son, Ikshavaku. For us this land is not just the enclosure of Ila’s children; it is Arya-varta, the land of the noble ones who uphold dharma. Our family deity is Surya, the sun, whose rays bring life, light, warmth and clarity of thought. Theirs is Chandra, the moon, who waxes and wanes, twisting emotions and morals.’

Shilavati overheard it all and absorbed it all. True son? What does that make Ila? False son? What does that mean? She did not ask. She left asking questions to her younger brother, the crown prince.

Ahuka always discussed the disputes he was asked to settle by his sabha with his son. This, the Janakas believed, was part of royal education. It enabled young

princes to appreciate the complexities of a problem: how does one distinguish fact from fiction, truth from perception. Formal understanding of dharma-shastras under the guidance of the Acharyas was never enough. There was more to dharma than what was written.

The cases were always presented in the form of riddles: ‘The riddles of the sixty-four Yoginis’.

‘The sixty-four Yoginis are handmaidens of Shiva and Shakti. They hold aloft a throne. He who sits on this throne becomes Chakra-varti, ruler of the world. But to sit on it one has to answer the sixty-four riddles of the sixty-four Yoginis. These are no ordinary riddles. They have no definitive answer. The answers vary in different periods of history, in different parts of the world. Appropriate answers are those that ensured stability and predictability at any given time in any given place. Only one Bharata has been able to answer all the riddles thus far. He was the one and only Chakra-varti. The rest of us are Rajas; our dharma satisfies most but not all,’ said the Janaka fathers to their Janaka sons.

One day, based on a particularly puzzling case presented in his sabha, Ahuka created a riddle for Nabhaka. ‘The twenty-third Yogini asks the man approaching the throne: Who is the father of Rohini’s child? Her old wrinkled husband or his young assistant who made her pregnant? Both claim the child.’

The actual accused and the actual defendant in this case were Vaishyas. The husband was an old cowherd, the lover was a distant nephew who helped the old man castrate young bulls. Ideally, the case should have been tried by the Vaishya council of elders since both the defendant and the accused belonged to the same varna. Kings of Ila-vrita were asked to intervene only when disputes involved two varnas or when the case had no precedent, as in this case.

‘That’s a simple one,’ Nabhaka said, ‘Surely the father is the man whose seed sprouts in her womb. That young scoundrel of a student.’

If it was so simple and straightforward, it would not be a Yogini’s question, thought Ahuka who was disappointed by his son’s hasty reply. He remembered the young student in court, hardly a scoundrel, more a youth quivering under the weight of desire.

A quiet voice sprang up from behind Nabhaka. It was Shilavati. ‘Tell me brother, to whom does the sapling in a field belong? To him who sows the seed or to him who owns the field?’

What an intelligent question, thought the king of Avanti. He looked at Nabhaka and watched him reply, once again, hastily. 'To the owner of the field, of course.'

'Rohini is the field, her husband its master, the student merely one who sowed the seed. Is that not what the dharma-shastras say? She may not love her husband but only he can be the father of her child.'

Nabhaka was at a loss of words. Ahuka was impressed. Shilavati had given more importance to the institution of marriage than to the whims of the heart. She has established the primacy of law over desire. From such actions was dharma born; it gave life certainty and predictability.

'Since when did you read the dharma-shastras, my child?' he asked Shilavati.

'I have not. But I pay attention to everything you say,' said Shilavati. Ahuka smiled, beaming with pride.

'I don't agree with her answer,' said Nabhaka, a little irritated at being upstaged by his sister. 'Culture cannot twist the truth of nature.'

'In nature there is no wife,' said Ahuka. 'A man can go to any woman and a woman to any man, provided he has the power or she has the will. So it was in the age before Shvetaketu, who watched his mother go to several men right in front of his eyes. He wanted to know of which seed he was the fruit. She had no answer. So he created laws that fettered women to fathers before marriage, husbands after marriage and sons when they are widows. That is why today you know I am your father and I know you are my son.'

'In nature there is no king, father,' said Nabhaka. 'What law binds me to be king after you? Why can I not be a poet, play the flute and make music on the banks of the Saraswati?'

'Making music is for Shudras,' said Ahuka, disturbed by his son's question. 'You must be king because I, your father, am king. All men are bound to their lineage. The sons of Brahmanas must be Brahmanas. The sons of Kshatriyas must be Kshatriyas. The sons of Vaishyas must be Vaishyas. The sons of Shudras must be Shudras. This is the varna-dharma. It ensures continuity of the past with the present. Guarantees predictability. But before you become king, we must find you a wife and she must give you a son. That is ashrama-dharma that all varnas are obliged to follow. It divides life into four quarters. Right now you are in the first quarter, a brahmachari, a student preparing for society. I am in the second

quarter, a grihasthi, a householder contributing to society. When your wife gives you a son, I will go into my third quarter, become a vanaprasthi, stay in the hermitage of teachers outside the city and slowly withdraw from society. As soon as you become a grandfather, I will enter the final quarter of my life, become a sanyasi, a hermit, and renounce all things worldly. Varna-ashrama-dharma organizes life in Ila-vrita. It was established by Manu. All Manavas, and that includes you, are bound to it. It makes humans of animals.'

'If my whole life has been decided for me, then why did Prajapati give me a heart? Why did he make me dream? Why does he bring music into my heart?' His eyes betrayed his anguish. 'When will I live my own life?'

Ahuka did not like his son's whining. 'After you repay your debts,' he snapped. 'That you exist means you are indebted to those who made your existence possible. That you have the fortune of being human, not a plant or animal, means you have another debt. That you are a man, not a woman, is indicative of yet another debt. Just ask your sister how lucky you are. That you are the eldest not the youngest is another debt. That you are my son, the son of a king, not the son of a priest or a potter, also indicates a debt. Debts are all around us. They bind us to the world and to each other, force us to live for others. Break the chain of obligations and you will unravel the fabric of society, my son. Remember, your destiny, whether you accept it or not, is nothing but your own debt, incurred by you consciously or unconsciously, either in this life or your past life. You must repay them. That is what being an Arya is all about. It is what dharma is all about. It is the noble thing to do.'

So many repayments. Repayments to one's ancestors, to one's family, one's caste, one's village, repayments to the Devas who reside in the sky, to Asuras beneath the earth, to the Apsaras in the rivers, to the Rishis who keep alive the wisdom of the Veda. 'Will I ever sing the songs of my heart and walk freely by the riverside?' asked Nabhaka.

'You can always sing in the evening, when the sabha has concluded and you are free to be with your wives,' said Shilavati softly, placing her hand on her brother's shoulders.

'And you sister, how will you compromise?' said Nabhaka, shrugging her hand away, his voice harsh and angry. 'How will you rule when they force you to become a wife?' Nabhaka did not want to hurt his elder sister. But he wanted her

to feel what he felt, the pain of dreams crushed on the altar of dharma. He saw tears well up in her eyes. She knew that just as a man's destiny is bound to his lineage, a woman's is bound to her body. Both are determined at birth and are immutable.

'It is not compromise, brother,' said Shilavati, holding back her tears. 'It is sacrifice. Dharma is all about sacrifice so that the rest can thrive.'

Later that evening, as he rested on the swing with his two wives, chewing betel nut, Ahuka said, 'She thinks clearly. She thinks deep. Life has spewed out a twisted fate for my daughter, given her a man's head and a woman's body.'

'And what about your son's fate?' asked the senior queen, as she massaged the king's forehead with warm coconut oil made fragrant with camphor.

'He will be king.'

'And that's good?'

'Of course,' said Ahuka, looking up at his wife, surprised by her comment. 'Isn't it?'

'For whom, Arya?'

Ahuka's heart ached for his children. The son who did not want to be king and the daughter who would not be allowed to be king. The account books of Yama, dark and dispassionate god of death and rebirth, shaped the destiny of his children. But Kama, the reckless god of life and love, had raised his sugarcane bow and struck both their hearts with dangerous desires. Yama, who relentlessly pursued all living creatures on his buffalo, was unconcerned. The children had to repay the debts whether they liked it or not. His noose was tight around their soul. He would hook them ruthlessly if they strayed. Kama meanwhile, flying on his parrot, accompanied by an entourage of bees and butterflies, would continue releasing the flower-tipped arrows, indifferent to the consequences, combating indignation and outrage with his charm. Like all children of Prajapati, Ahuka realized his children would also have to live their lives restrained by the noose of Yama and spurred by the arrows of Kama.

'Maybe I should send her to the Acharyas with her brother to be instructed formally on the dharma-shastras.'

'No,' said both the queens in unison. 'If you do that no king will accept her as his wife.'

'What do I do then? Let the sapling wither away?'

‘Do you have to take all the decisions, my lord? Can life not take decisions sometime? From Prajapati has come the problem. From Prajapati will come the solution.’

The king of Avanti smiled, pleased with the comforting wisdom of the inner quarters.

THE PROPOSAL



When Mandavya came to Avanti with the formal proposal of marriage, Ahuka's wives were excited. ‘When a man approaches a girl's father requesting her hand for his son it is marriage as prescribed by Prajapati, the highest form of marriage. Shilavati is the luckiest girl in Ila-vrita.’

But Ahuka was not happy when he had heard what the astrologers had to say. ‘The price is too high,’ he said.

‘This is her chance,’ said Mandavya. ‘With widowhood will come the opportunity to rule. Nothing will make your daughter happier. She has the body of a woman but the head of a king. The Angirasa have told me so. Rajan, you can give your daughter to another king. And maybe he will live a long life. And for all that time your daughter will be confined to the women's quarters. And she will spend her entire life there looking after his children and playing dice, feeling miserable and worthless. And should death strike her husband, she would be a widow, still confined to the women's quarters with no royal status because her husband's brothers and uncles would never give her power. Can you prevent that? Here, you are sure that your daughter will have all the powers due to a king. Pruthalashva is eager to shed his responsibilities. And Prasenajit, the poor lad, who lives in Yama's shadow, has no heart in kingship. All he enjoys is the hunt. From the first day she steps into Vallabhi, your daughter will rule the land.’

‘What if she does not bear a child?’

Mandavya sensed Ahuka's defences slipping. ‘She will. She is fertile, I am sure. I have seen her gait. She has child-bearing hips.’

And so it came to pass, Shilavati became the wife of Prasenajit, the crown prince of Vallabhi, destined to be its queen.

The first time she was presented in the pillared hall known as the maha-sabha, the king insisted that she and Prasenajit sit on the turtle throne. ‘You are the

future king and queen. This is how the crown prince and his bride of the Turuvasu clan have always been presented to the courtiers.'

Shilavati sat on the throne dressed in red, laden with jewellery. Bracelets, armlets, waistbands, necklaces, nose-rings, toe-rings, hair-pins. All made of gold. She could barely walk. 'You are the queen. You must represent the kingdom's prosperity,' said her maids. For the first time in her life she had an anklet of gold, a privilege restricted to the queens of Ila-vrita. She sat coyly next to her husband, never raising her eyes, enjoying the attention. Elders of the four varnas came to the newly-wed couple and offered them a betel leaf, a coconut and a gift of gold. They sprinkled rice on them, wishing them a long and happy married life.

Shilavati felt a rush of power. This place with its pillared corridors and open courtyard was where the Turuvasus sat and held court for generations. This was where dharma was instituted and maintained in Vallabhi. For a brief moment, Shilavati dreamt of herself on the throne. Behind her sat the Shudras, before her sat the Vaishyas, to the right sat the Kshatriyas, and to the left sat the Brahmanas. The parasol above her head, the bow in her hand. Her warriors blowing conch-shell trumpets. Beautiful women seated beside her waving yak-tail fly whisks offering her slivers of betel nut wrapped with spices in betel leaf. Community elders paying obeisance. From the chambers above, surrounding the royal courtyard, the women showered flowers. The royal banner with the image of a turtle fluttered from the rooftops. Everyone acknowledged her as their leader—the supreme fountainhead of peace and prosperity.

Later, that night, as they lay in bed, arms entwined, Shilavati placed her head on her husband's chest and said, 'How does it feel to sit on the throne, Arya?'

Prasenajit replied, 'Tiring.'

Shilavati laughed and looked up at her husband. He was serious. She realized that he did not share her excitement at the court. So much like her brother. Only this man was no poet. He was a hunter. More interested in talking about the boar he stalked, the deer he caught and the parrot he shot in mid-flight.

MARITAL BLISS



Nothing pleased Prasenajit more than leaving the city and spending time in the forest. Walking amidst trees, resting on rocks, sleeping under the open sky,

watching butterflies make their way to wild flowers, fish leaping out of streams. He wanted his wife to accompany him. 'I have never left the palace,' she said.

'Dhritarashtra's wife, Gandhari, has blindfolded herself to share her husband's blindness. Won't you at least accompany me to the forest and share my passion?' How could Shilavati manoeuvre around such an argument? So, like a good wife, she followed her husband wherever he went.

He would spend days in the forest, chasing water hogs and wild fowl, bathing in rivers, eating berries and roasted meat. At first Shilavati found the experience uncomfortable. But gradually she started enjoying it. She especially enjoyed the thought that her husband enjoyed sharing his passion with her.

'See this,' he said pointing to a cocoon. 'The moth inside is struggling to come out.' Or when they were on the banks of the Kalindi, 'Let us hide. I think a herd of elephants are heading this way.' The sight of an Ashoka tree in full bloom excited him. 'Nature is so beautiful. So alive.' Shilavati wanted to ask questions. He would stop her. 'Don't. Just enjoy the sight. Feel the bird flying. Don't reason with it. Experience it. This is life as it should be, Bharya.'

She loved that he addressed her as Bharya. Bharya. Wife. Vishnu's Lakshmi. Shiva's Shakti.

Prasenajit asked her once, 'Do you know why Ileshwar becomes Ileshwari every new moon night?'

'No,' said Shilavati.

'I think because he loves his wife so much they merge into each other with the waxing and waning of the moon. They are not two, but one, as man and wife should be. As you and I will be.'

Once, while wandering in the woods, they came upon the carcass of a wild buffalo teeming with maggots. 'How disgusting,' cringed Shilavati.

'I don't think the maggots will agree with you,' said Prasenajit. Shilavati realized the wisdom in her husband's simple words. The human way is not the only way in this world.

Prasenajit encouraged Shilavati to use his bow. 'Women are not allowed,' she said.

'Rules are made for the city. In the jungle, desire reigns supreme. You get what you want, if you are willing to fight for it,' said Prasenajit, showing her how to place the arrow and draw the string.

Shilavati remembered her great joy when she shot her first arrow. The sense of achievement. He picked her up, placed her on his shoulder and ran along the river bank, announcing her victory to the uninterested birds of the forest.

When a year had passed, Shilavati became proficient with the bow but there was no sign of a child. Pruthalashva grew impatient. His queen said, 'My lord, keep your anxieties to yourself. Don't burden your son with them. If what the stars speak is the truth then our son has but a few more moons to live. Let him enjoy it in peace.'

Seventeen months after her marriage, Shilavati showed signs of pregnancy. When the midwives confirmed she was with child, Pruthalashva said, 'Now I can retire into the forest.'

Mandavya dissuaded him. 'Let the child be born.'

'How much longer?' Pruthalashva complained.

The women of the palace celebrated the news by decorating the entire palace with bright orange Genda flowers. They bathed Shilavati, fed her, dressed her, entertained her. They never left her alone. She was not allowed to go on hunts. Shilavati missed the forest.

'Our son was conceived in the forest,' Prasenajit told her. 'Near the bilva tree, when we heard a lion roar, and you were scared.'

Shilavati remembered how Prasenajit distracted her with a kiss. Their love-making, stoked by fear, was passionate and intense. It was in the open, in daylight. But she did not mind. She did not care for the monkeys who stared from the branches overhead or for the peacock she saw creeping up from the corner of her eye. She felt like the Asparas who glide on river streams. Prasenajit was her Gandharva slipping out of a spring flower. There was more pleasure on the forest floor than in the palace bed. She could moan and shout and scream without inhibition. She could make demands. Or submit without embarrassment. She let the soft grass on the forest floor caress her back, her breasts, her thighs, her buttocks as her husband made love to her.

'Maybe I conceived a daughter,' said Shilavati.

'I am too much of a man to father a girl. Even the stars agree, Bharya,' said Prasenajit.



Then, he died. Her dear friend. Her beloved husband, the only one who could call her Bharya. Leaving Shilavati all alone.

It happened in the palace. In the safe space guarded by Kshatriyas. A serpent slipped in unnoticed. Prasenajit stepped on it as he got out of bed, just as the astrologer predicted in the eighteenth year of his life, two years after his marriage, two months before the birth of his son.

The fangs struck and the poison spread. He was blue before anyone got to him. 'My son, my son, oh my son...' Pruthalashva cried and collapsed. He could not bring himself to cremate his son. The Kshatriya elders had to substitute for him.

The men wept, the women wailed, the whole palace crumbled in sorrow. Shilavati felt Yama's hook striking her heart. 'This is written in your account book,' said the god of death without expression. She refused to submit to the pain. She would not give Yama the satisfaction of watching her tears roll. But then, did Yama care? Even the rolling of tears would be just another entry in his account book.

She ignored Yama. She looked at the world around her. It was being washed away by waves of grief. She would not let it. She had to hold things together. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She saw her husband being dragged by Yama's noose out of Vallabhi through the forests across the river Vaitarni into the desolate land of the dead. He was screaming, shouting, resisting, calling out her name. 'Shilavati. Shilavati.' All she could do was turn away in helplessness, open her eyes and look at all those who came to console her.

'How tragic, how terrible, how horrible,' they said.

Watching the young widow bear it all stoically the Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas and the Shudras of Vallabhi broke down. Shilavati comforted all of them. She had to survive this tragedy. She had to. For her son. For her family. For her kingdom.

CORONATION



A royal widow must shave her head, renounce all jewellery and cosmetics and wear only undyed fabric. Without a husband, she has no reason to adorn her body. But Shilavati was not allowed to shave her head or renounce her jewellery

or wear colourless clothes. Dressed in red and laden with gold, she was led by the Brahmanas to the throne. Milk was poured on her. Then honey. Then treacle. Then water. This was the raj-abhishekha that bestows on the king authority over the lives of other men.

The old king Pruthashva had renounced the kingdom after the death of his son. He had refused to listen to the arguments and requests of the Kshatriya council. 'Enough,' he said. 'Let me go. Now you have someone with you who wants to rule. I leave the fate of Vallabhi and the Turuvasus in my daughter-in-law's very capable hands.'

The royal priests held the ivory parasol over Shilavati's head and placed the golden bow in her hand. The Brahmanas sat to her left, the Kshatriyas to her right, behind her were the Shudras, before her the Vaishyas. The warriors blew their conch-shell trumpets and held aloft the Turuvasu banner on the rooftops. Chieftains paid her obeisance. From the chambers overlooking the central courtyard, the women showered flowers.

Mandavya came with a bowl of red vermillion paste. Shilavati raised her head to receive the royal mark on her forehead. Mandavya bent down and with his finger traced the tilak vertically upwards from just above her navel, taking her by surprise. She looked at Mandavya. He stayed focused on her navel.

It was then that Shilavati realized that the parasol, the bow, the conch-shell trumpets, the banners, the obeisance and the flowers were not for her. They were all for him who was inside her, she realized. The unborn prince. The future king of Vallabhi. Her son, Yuvanashva.

Book Two



REGENT



Before Yuvanashva was born, the elders were anxious. ‘What if Shilavati gives birth to a girl? Or an unhealthy imperfect child?’ asked the Kshatriya elders. ‘Who then will be our king?’

Shilavati had replied, placing a stone on her heart, ‘The master may be dead but the field still belongs to him. Like the wives of Vichitra-virya, queens of Hastinapuri, who offered their wombs to Vyasa, after the death of their husband, I will offer my womb to a worthy Rishi. From his seed placed without emotion or attachment will come the king we seek.’ The council saluted the young widow. She was indeed wise. Well versed in matters of dharma.

Shilavati was relieved when she gave birth to her son. As she held him in her arms she remembered her husband’s words, ‘I am too much of a man to father a daughter.’ She smiled, then wept.

Shilavati avoided the pillared maha-sabha of the Turuvasu kings. There she had to sit on a silver pedestal with green cushions placed lower than the gold throne with red cushions. She decided to manage the affairs of Vallabhi from a chamber located in the women’s quarters. Here she sat on the floor, on a tiger-skin rug, but nothing was placed above her. The maha-sabha was reserved for ceremonial and festive occasions. The golden bow, the ivory parasol and the

yak-tail fly whisks were placed on the red cushions, reminding all that Vallabhi still had no king, only a regent.

Yuvanashva's cradle was placed in Shilavati's audience chamber. This disturbed the Brahmana and Kshatriya elders initially as they were not used to a leader who nursed a child while discussing matters of dharma.

Guided by Mandavya, Shilavati carried out her role as ruler and mother with aplomb. She organized the annual cow-giving ceremony for the Brahmana elders while putting Yuvanashva to sleep. She permitted the Vaishya elders to burn a forest on the western bank of the Kalindi for a new farmland while feeding her toothless son a meal of bananas. She gave the Shudra elders instructions to build a new gate for Vallabhi while Yuvanashva chewed on her hair. She decided the rate of tax while playing hide and seek. The ministers and advisors gradually got used to this and even started participating in the raising of the prince. A time came when the eldest Kshatriya, commander of the army, could discuss the need to organize an archery tournament to select guards for the palace while tying Yuvanashva's dhoti.

When she was eighteen, Shilavati organized an elephant hunt. 'There are no metal mines in Vallabhi. We can sell the captured elephants to the king of Anga for his gold and copper,' she said. An elephant hunt demands many resources and complex organization: digging of vast pits to serve as traps, the beating of gigantic drums to scare the elephants into the trap, torturing and forcing the leader of the herd into submission. Shilavati supervised it all. Her success earned her the respect of Vallabhi's Kshatriya elders, who at first thought she would merely be a figurehead.

Like any good king in Ila-vrita, Shilavati appointed a network of spies who posed as bards and who knew all that happened in Ila-vrita. These 'eyes of Varuna' as they were sometimes called told her of the strange ceremony by which Drupada had become father of twins: a boy and a girl. 'From the yagna's fire-pit, the two Siddhas, Yaja and Upayaja, churned out for the king of Panchala the children Shiva had long ago promised him.'

'But did Ileshwari not give Drupada a son?' asked Shilavati.

'But not quite the son, he wanted,' said the spies. 'On Shikhandi's wedding night, his bride had come out of the bedchamber screaming that her husband had no manhood, that he was a woman. The bride's father, the king of Dasharni, was

so angry that he sent his chief concubine to check if this was true. The concubine contradicted the bride and insisted Shikhandi was a man. The words of the wife, however, did confirm something that had long been whispered on the streets of Panchala: that the son of Drupada was no son at all, that he would never be allowed to enter a battlefield and so could never kill either Drona or Bhishma. A desperate Drupada approached Yaja and Upayaja, two Siddhas, and had begged them to perform a yagna through which Shiva's boon would be realized. He wanted the children who would destroy Drona and Bhishma and divide the house of Kurus. After a long and complex ceremony, the two sages drew out from beneath the embers of the altar a fully grown woman now called Draupadi and a fully grown man now called Dhrishthadyumna.'

'The king of Panchala manipulates cosmic forces in his desire for vengeance. The consequences will not be good,' said Mandavya.

'I agree,' said Shilavati. Her father always told her that in crisis change your mind, not the world. It's easier. Simpler. Safer.

As ruler, Shilavati was responsible for ensuring everybody followed varna-ashrama-dharma and conducted themselves in accordance with their station in society and stage in life. She was constantly in touch with the elders of the four varnas making sure that all was well in the kingdom. That wealth poured inwards, not outwards. That there were enough lakes and tanks in the villages so that one did not depend on the whimsical rains. She organized festivals and fairs around Ileshwara at different times of the year, attracting more pilgrims and with them more wealth. She resolved conflicts between the varnas and received envoys of neighbouring kings. All those who came to the palace, were looked after by the royal mother. Vast amounts of food were cooked in the royal kitchens to feed them.

Had it not been for Shilavati, this small principality would have been swallowed by neighbouring kings as soon as her husband died. She secured the kingdom's boundaries by allowing the royal horse of rival kings ride through her kingdom when they performed the Ashwamedha sacrifice, a gesture that symbolically expressed her submission to the horse's master. This allegiance to multiple kings ensured no one claimed exclusive rights over Vallabhi, for while the kings were not afraid of a widow-queen, they were wary of each other. Shilavati was left alone provided she paid them a handsome tribute once a year.

Vallabhi could afford these tributes. The peace that followed Shilavati's policy of submission had made it prosperous. No sugarcane harvest on the banks of the Kalindi was ever destroyed by marauding armies. Caravans of traders and pilgrims on its highways, making their way to the many festivals and fairs organized by Shilavati, feared no attack. The granaries of Vallabhi overflowed with grain. Stables were full of cows, horses and elephants.

When Brahmanas complained that peace and submission was making the warrior clans restless, Shilavati addressed the Kshatriya elders, 'Kingship is not about winning wars. It is about maintaining order. Order is dharma and dharma is Vishnu. Vishnu holds in his hands not only the conch-shell trumpet of war but also the lotus of diplomacy. Diplomacy has served us well. It may not have brought glory but it has brought stability. In Vallabhi, Vishnu does not ride the hawk of war; he reclines in peace on the serpent of time. At his feet, seated on the lotus of diplomacy, is Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, blessing us all.'

The Kshatriyas agreed.

Shilavati told her son, 'If you want Lakshmi to follow you, be a Vishnu. Do your duty. Don't run after glory.'

Yuvanashva obeyed.

MOTHER



Ideally, at the age of seven, a prince is sent to the hermitage of an Acharya where he is educated with Kshatriyas and Brahmana boys his age. There he stays, serving his teacher, living and learning with him all year round, returning home only during the rains. But Shilavati broke from tradition. She appealed to Mandavya, 'He is the last of the Turuvasus. I don't want him in any danger. I don't want him out of my sight.'

And so all the best of the Acharyas in and around Vallabhi were invited to the palace to educate the prince. A new section was added to the palace to serve as the royal school. To give the prince company, young Kshatriya and Brahmana boys were invited to stay with him. Their families agreed willingly. Amongst them was Vipula, Mandavya's son, who became Yuvanashva's best friend.

Every day, the prince was encouraged to run, wrestle, lift weights, climb on poles, regulate his breath, make his limbs nimble by performing asanas. Masseurs were engaged to relax his tired limbs, to make his bones strong and

joints flexible. At dusk each day, the Veda was chanted in his presence so that the potent power of the hymns shaped his thoughts. He was taught how to string a bow, shoot arrows, use the spear and the sword. He learnt to wrestle and ride chariots and fight with the mace. Acharyas were appointed to teach him statecraft and economics and politics. He was also taught to appreciate the arts, music and painting, the smell of fragrances, the flavour of food. 'The future king must know the importance of dharma. Of rites, rituals and rules. He must also appreciate the value of sensory delights. For what is life without indulging the flesh,' said his teachers.

Every evening, Yuvanashva would go to his mother's chamber to eat. Shilavati preferred cooking for her son herself. Her maids cut the vegetables, cleaned the grains, washed the meat and prepared the spices but it was she who did the cooking. Boiling, frying, roasting, steaming. A delight for her son every day.

Yuvanashva would refuse to eat alone. 'You must eat with me mother,' he would say.

A plate of gold would be kept before the prince. A banana leaf before the queen. When Yuvanashva asked why, the maids replied, 'Your mother has no husband. She must eat simply.'

'But my mother is queen. She must eat like one. Get her a plate of gold.' The prince had spoken. A plate of gold was brought and Shilavati ate from it. 'And you will eat meat and fish and all the wonderful things you cook for me,' he ordered his mother.

Shilavati hugged Yuvanashva. 'I would love to. But it burns my stomach. I prefer fruit and water and some rice with milk,' she said. A lie. Because she yearned for meat and fish and the spicy dishes she cooked for her son. She kept away from them because they kept her awake all night and made her body ache with desire for the man who was now in the land of Yama.

Yuvanashva adored his mother. Every evening, after his meal, he would tell her all that he had experienced that day. How he had learnt to string the bow and how he learnt to stand up straight and throw a spear even when the chariot moved at full speed. Shilavati heard all that her son had to say. She adored him too.

In the tradition of her fathers, Shilavati would tell her son all that happened in court in the form of the riddles of the Sixty-four Yoginis. Story after story. Riddle after riddle. Some of his answers would make her proud, some would make her frown, some made her laugh.

‘How many of the questions do you know answers to?’ he asked her once.

‘Not all,’ she replied, caressing his head.

‘I think you know most. If you were a man, you would surely have been a Chakra-varti.’

Shilavati hugged her son. ‘Thrones are for men, my little king,’ she said, her heart brimming with affection.

Yuvanashva realized it pleased his mother when he obeyed her. So he obeyed her, doing all that she said without question. There were days when he wanted to swim, but he would stay in the palace and read aloud the verses from the dharma-shastras. There were times when he wanted to play the flute. ‘That’s not appropriate for kings,’ she would say. He would immediately put the flute down.

What made him most happy was the look of approval in his mother’s eyes. ‘What do you think mother?’ he asked when he released an arrow that struck its mark, the eye of a fish suspended from the roof.

‘Good, very good,’ she said. ‘But can you do it looking at its reflection in a vat of oil placed below as Arjuna did to win the hand of the princess of Panchala?’

‘Is it true that he shares his wife with his brothers?’

The news about the decision of the five Pandava princes to make Draupadi, Shikhandi’s younger sister, their common wife had spread like wildfire across Ilavrita. The women said, ‘How lucky she is.’ The men said, ‘She is a whore.’ Shilavati recognized it as a political move. Pandu’s widow, Kunti, in her foresight had ensured that the woman who could have pulled her sons apart by marrying one had ended up uniting them by marrying all. Sure enough, soon after their marriage to Draupadi, the five Pandavas were able to force their blind uncle and their hundred cousins to give them their half of the inheritance on which they built the kingdom of Indra-prastha. Draupadi had apparently told Kunti that if she wanted her to be woman enough to satisfy her five sons, her five sons had to be men enough to make her queen of their rightful inheritance.

‘Yes, his mother said that he should share everything with his brothers and Arjuna obeyed. Such a worthy son,’ said Shilavati, her voice full of admiration.

Yuvanashva struggled harder with the bow. Not to be as good as Arjuna but to be as good as his mother wanted.

‘The prince should be trained to yoke wild bulls too,’ said the Kshatriya elders. ‘The king of Kosala gave his daughter to the man who yoked seven wild bulls.’

‘Since when did Kshatriyas yoke bulls? That is the vocation of Vaishyas.’ said Shilavati.

‘Maybe the king of Kosala wanted a Kshatriya who was raised amongst cowherds to marry his daughter,’ said Mandavya.

Shilavati knew the council was referring to Krishna, a young Yadava warrior who was the talk of all Ilavrita.

The Yadavas were a confederacy of tribes who lived around Mathura, south of Vallabhi. Like the Turuvasus and the Kurus, they descended from Ila and Yayati. But they had no king. They preferred being ruled by a council of worthy elders. But the ambitious Kamsa, with the backing of his father-in-law, the mighty king of Magadha, audaciously disbanded the Yadava ruling council, declared himself the dictator of Mathura and killed all those who threatened his power. Krishna was Kamsa’s sister’s son. He was raised in secret amongst cowherds to protect him from his murderous maternal uncle. He had returned to Mathura a grown man, rallied his kinsmen behind him, openly challenged Kamsa’s authority, killed him with his bare hands and restored power to the Yadava ruling council. This had angered the king of Magadha who sent his vast army to destroy Mathura. The Yadavas under the leadership of Krishna fought back. After surviving seventeen attacks, the king of Magadha managed to raze the city of Mathura to the ground but the Yadavas refused to submit. They followed Krishna to the west across mountains and deserts and finally across the sea to establish a new home on the island of Dwaraka, which was now a flourishing trading port. The story of the Yadava uprising under Krishna’s leadership had inspired bards to compose songs that were now on the lips of every young man and woman in the land.

Krishna was related to the Kuru clan. Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, was his father’s sister. To protect the interests of his cousins, Krishna had helped the Pandavas build the city of Indra-prastha on their half of the inheritance. The Pandavas, in turn, helped Krishna avenge the destruction of Mathura and kill the

king of Magadha. Krishna arranged to crown Yudhishtira, eldest of the Pandava brothers, king in the presence of all the kings of Ila-vrita.

It hurt Shilavati terribly when the invitation to Yudhishtira's coronation was addressed to her young son. It reminded her that while everyone in Vallabhi treated her as a worthy ruler, for the rest of Ila-vrita she was just a king's widow. Inauspicious.

THE CROWS



It was when Yuvanashva was thirteen and whiskers of manhood first appeared on his face that Mandavya felt it was time he be crowned king. He advised Shilavati to conduct the ceremony at the earliest. 'But he is incomplete. Let us get him a wife first,' said Shilavati.

That was true. In Ila-vrita, men were considered incomplete unless they had a wife by their side. Without her, said the Rishis, they have no right to worldly pleasures. For she is the field of the next generation, foundation of a home. She is Lakshmi, container of pleasure, prosperity and power, who transforms a man into Vishnu—lord, king, controller, master of the world. For Yuvanashva to be Raja, upholder of dharma in Vallabhi, he needed to have a wife by his side.

But Shilavati was in no hurry to find a daughter-in-law. No girl was good enough to marry her son. 'I will not compromise. The soil on which my son's seed will sprout has to be worthy of my household.'

It was then that the Pitrs swept into her life.

They slipped into her dreams in the form of crows. Hundreds of crows. No, thousands. Descending on Vallabhi, perching themselves on rooftops and windows and flagpoles and gateways. Everywhere she looked she saw crows. In the gardens, in the inner courtyards, next to sacred ponds, in royal orchards. Covering the domes of every shrine, big and small, including Ileshwara Mahadev, blocking out the sky, the sun, the clouds. Cawing without a pause. A deafening sound. It was the shriek of the dead demanding they be heard from across the Vaitarni. They did not let Shilavati sleep. They reminded her of her duty as the matriarch of the royal household. 'Don't delay his marriage, Shilavati. If your son, your only son, does not bear sons, we will be trapped forever in the land of the dead. And it will be all your fault. You were stingy with your womb. Let only one of us pass. Now make your son our father. Or else

we are doomed. Help us, Shilavati. Raft the Turuvasu forefathers across Vaitarni to the shores of a new life. You are our only hope.'

FIRST WIFE



But getting a wife in Ila-vrita was not easy, especially for a prince. Men were invited by kings to demonstrate their worthiness in a tournament. The worthy ones were garlanded by the daughters. The unworthy ones had to resort to abducting girls or buying them. Such practices were permitted in Ila-vrita. For more important than the will of a woman was the desire of the ancestor.

Shilavati could have ordered her Kshatriyas to abduct a princess for him as Bhishma had abducted the princesses of Kashi for Vichitra-virya, his weakling of a brother. Or, with all the wealth at her disposal, she could have easily bought him a wife as Bhishma had bought Madri for Vichitra-virya's son, Pandu, when his first wife, Kunti, showed no signs of pregnancy after marriage. But Shilavati liked the idea of her son being chosen. She told Yuvanashva, 'Only Rakshasas abduct wives. Only Asuras buy them. I want you to be Gandharva, irresistible to your wife, as Vishnu is to Lakshmi.'

When Yuvanashva was fourteen, ready to step out of his teacher's shadow, news reached Vallabhi that the king of Udra was organizing a swayamvara for his youngest daughter, the princess Simantini. Invitations had been sent to many kingdoms, including Panchala, Indra-prastha, Hastina-puri and Dwaraka. This made Shilavati anxious.

The king of Udra was powerful. That made his daughter a coveted prize for all the royal families of Ila-vrita. Shikhandi of Panchala would go to Udra as would the Pandavas of Indra-prastha and the Kauravas of Hastina-puri. The Yadavas of Dwaraka would send a representative too, maybe Krishna himself.

Shilavati wanted the princess of Udra for Vallabhi. Not to forge a political alliance but because she wanted a daughter-in-law, a wife for her son, a mother for her grandsons. A royal field that would nurture the royal seed.

Shilavati was relieved to learn the swayamvara did not involve an archery contest. Yuvanashva was a good archer, but no match for Arjuna. Simantini was to choose a husband from amongst the assembled kings and princes. Yuvanashva was a handsome boy, brown as the earth after the first rain, with sharp features and thick long hair, long limbs, lean muscular body, a broad chest, very much

like his father and his grandfather. ‘But he is not as handsome as Krishna,’ said the bards, who had seen Krishna and fallen in love with him.

Shilavati told her son, ‘All other princes will ride into Udra on their chariots. But you will ride in on an elephant. The largest bull elephant in Vallabhi. It will be decorated with a silver head-jewel, silver anklets and a silver chain round its neck. Two Brahmanas will sit behind you, one holding a parasol and another holding a pair of yak-tail fly whisks, waving it from side to side. Walking beside the elephant will be Kshatriya warriors on chariots, each holding the royal banner of Vallabhi. Leading you into the city will be our royal herald and musicians playing the flute enchanting everyone in the city. Round your neck will gleam a necklace of gold and sapphire. When you cross the gates of the city, the king of Udra will look out of his window and tell his queen, “There comes the crown prince of Vallabhi. If our daughter chooses him, she will be his chief queen and we will have a king as our son-in-law. Krishna is no king. Shikhandi not even a man. Arjuna shares his kingdom and his wife with his brothers. And the Kauravas? Their father clings to a crown that is rightfully Pandu’s. Let us encourage our daughter to select Yuvanashva instead.”’ Shilavati paused. She saw her son’s eyes gleaming with excitement. ‘Sometimes Gandharvas have to be clever to get the Apsara,’ she said.

‘And for the bridal gift, I will give her a game of dice painted on cloth,’ said Yuvanashva.

‘What? A game of dice!’ asked Shilavati, taken by surprise. Then she smiled indulgently, realizing how little her son knew about women. ‘I think she would prefer a necklace of pearls or gem-studded armlets.’

Yuvanashva looked into his mother’s eyes. ‘No mother. No woman really wants that. A woman wants to know she is loved and appreciated and honoured. There is no greater sorrow for a woman, or for a man, to sit bejewelled knowing that nobody loves them or cares for them or appreciates them or honors them. A string of pearls or a gem-studded nose-ring will indicate my current fortune. But fortune does not last forever. Tomorrow, I may lose my kingdom, as Nala lost his, as Rama lost his, as Harishchandra lost his. My wife must continue to walk beside me, on my left side, close to my heart, whether I sit on the throne or walk in the forest. I want the princess of Udra to know that I invite her to reside in my heart and enjoy with me the game of life. What better way to express it than with

a game of dice, each throw of the die filled with the uncertainty of Yama's account book, each movement of the coin brimming with the assurance of Kama's arrow.'

'Where did you learn all this?' said Shilavati, feeling proud of her son.

'I hear everything you say, mother, when I sit behind you in the audience chamber. The bards whisper that you married my father to rule Vallabhi but I know you married him because you loved him. I watch you gaze at the bow he gave you. That look, mother, is what I would like my wife to have when she looks upon me.'

Shilavati felt a lump in her throat. She saw her husband smiling on the other side of the Vaitarni. Before him was the game of dice rolled out. He was waiting for her to make the next move.

Yuvanashva followed his mother's advice. His grand entrance impressed the king. The princess loved his gift. Instructed by her father, directed by her heart, Simantini accepted Yuvanashva as her Gandharva and placed a garland of lotus flowers round his neck.

Neither the Pandavas nor the Kauravas, neither Krishna nor Shikhandi nor his brother, Dhristadhyumna, attended Simantini's swayamvara. Shilavati wondered why.

Her spies gave her the reason. They were busy playing dice with their cousins and gambling away their fortune. 'They gambled even their wife away,' said the bards.

'And no one stopped them?' asked Shilavati in disbelief.

'No, the elders felt everything was being done within the letter of the law. The Kauravas were not content to win everything the Pandavas possessed. They went on to humiliate the sons of Kunti. They dragged Draupadi by her hair from the inner chambers and tried to disrobe her in public.'

Shilavati felt sick. 'Publicly humiliating a woman is within the letter of the law? Since when? Since Dhritarashtra became king?'

'Embarrassed by the whole event, Dhritarashtra allowed the Pandavas to play another game of dice. The conditions were that if the Kauravas lose they return to the Pandavas their lost fortune. If the Pandavas lose, they live as exiles in the forest for twelve years and in the thirteenth year live in hiding. Should they be

recognized in that year, they go to the forest for another twelve years. If they don't, they get their kingdom back. The Pandavas lost.'

'So the Pandavas have gambled away even their identity. Fools. Irresponsible fools.'

'The princes of Panchala, Shikhandi and Dhristadhyumna, rushed to meet their sister in the forest. Even if this had not happened, they would not have attended the swayamvara at Udra.'

'Why?'

'Because Shikhandi loves his wife too much and Dhristadhyumna prefers war to wives.'

'And where was their friend Krishna when this happened?' Shilavati asked.

'Defending Dwaraka. The ships of Shalva and Dantavakra had blocked the entrance to the harbour,' they replied.

'You have managed to get information from around Dwaraka too.' Shilavati was impressed. She smiled. The bards bowed their head humbly. Shilavati asked her maids to give them cloth and rice and gold. More than the gifts, it was the look of appreciation that mattered to the spies. Shilavati was their mother. And they were her children ever eager to please her.

Shilavati then busied herself for her son's wedding. Thirty years old. Daughter. Wife. Mother. Now mother-in-law.

THE ARUNDHATI STAR



After the wedding ceremony, the countless rituals, the unending advice, the feasts, the songs and the celebrations, Yuvanashva and Simantini sat alone in the bridal chamber, facing each other, wondering what it means to be husband and wife.

Yuvanashva's servants had removed all his jewels. He had been bathed in warm water and made to wear a fine white dhoti.

There was only one lamp in the room. Lighting up his new bride. She too had been bathed in warm water. She was dressed in a sheer red sari. The light of the lamp penetrated the fabric and revealed a soft sensuous body. She was chewing tambula, a rich mix of herbs and nuts wrapped in a betel leaf. It made her lips red and her mouth fragrant. Behind her was a window that opened up to the sky.

She bent her head and lowered her eyes. Afraid to look up at the man sitting in front of her. The crown prince who came into Udra on an elephant and won her heart with a game of dice. He was her Gandharva. She was his Apsara. No longer free like the river-nymphs. Now fettered by his music, ready to follow him wherever he went.

After a long period of awkward silence had elapsed, Yuvanashva finally found the courage to speak, 'Can you see the Arundhati star?' Simantini looked up and saw her husband staring at the window behind her. She turned around.

The sky was black. Stars glittered on it like diamonds set on Lakshmi's hair. The Arundhati star? Where would it be? Next to the seven stars that represented the seven celestial sages, the Sapta Rishis, the first seven sages to hear the Veda from the four heads of Prajapati. Arundhati was the chaste wife, who followed them wherever they went, feeding them, taking care of them as a mother, a sister and a wife. Simantini located the Arundhati star easily. But as advised by her mother and her maids, she pointed to a star that was not Arundhati and said, 'There is Arundhati.'

This was a game, to help husband and wife engage with each other, prescribed by the kama-shastra, the treatise on pleasure.

It was said that Prajapati, after singing out the chants that make up the Veda, sang out hymns related to conduct, wealth, pleasure and peace. These were the four shastras: dharma-shastra, artha-shastra, kamashastra and moksha-shastra. While the Veda explained the nature of the world, the shastras tried to organize and celebrate the same.

The kama-shastras recommended that to make the wife comfortable on the wedding night, the husband must look to the sky and ask her to find Arundhati. The wife must feign ignorance and point to a star that is not Arundhati. The husband must then grab the opportunity, seize her hand, point to another star and say, 'See that star. That is also not Arundhati.' He must point to many more stars, each time saying, 'See that star. That is also not Arundhati,' each time making her more and more comfortable with his touch and his proximity, each time sliding his hand further down, from hand to wrist to arm to armpit then waist, hip and finally thigh. By the end of the exercise, Arundhati in the sky will not matter. There will be an Arundhati on the bed. Chaste and submissive and dutiful and wise.

‘I am scared, Arya,’ said Simantini. The words just slipped out as Yuvanashva placed his hand rather hesitatingly on her thighs. No man had ever touched Simantini’s thighs. As she felt his hand slip down her arm, her thighs craved for his touch. The desire frightened her. She regretted revealing her feelings. Would he withdraw, she wondered.

‘I am scared too, Bharya,’ admitted Yuvanashva, almost biting his tongue as the words left his lips. Kings-to-be must never show their weakness.

Simantini turned to face her husband. She saw the curiosity and the anxiety in his eyes. He was just a boy. Scared as she was. Nervous as she was. He had opened up to her. Revealed his vulnerability. Now it was time for her to open up. Part her thighs. She wanted to caress the fine hair on his chest. Run her fingers down his back. Bite his shoulders and his arm. But she controlled herself. He had to take the lead. She would comply. She would submit as good wives are supposed to. The Apsara dancing to the Gandharva’s tune.

A gentle breeze blew out the lamp. Yuvanashva kissed Simantini. His tongue sought entry into her mouth. She parted her lips. Let him probe her, explore her. She spread herself like the earth and welcomed him as if he was the rain. He slipped in effortlessly.

For Simantini, this was the moment when Yuvanashva became part of her soul.

For Yuvanashva, it was a moment of growing up. ‘She is the embodiment of Vallabhi,’ Mandavya had told him. ‘If she is happy, the kingdom is happy. If she is fertile, the kingdom is fertile. Take care of her. She is your Lakshmi and you are her Vishnu.’

For Shilavati, who sat alone in her room looking at the Arundhati star and remembering her own wedding night, this was the moment when the doorway opened between the land of the living and the land of the dead. If all went well, an ancestor would find his way into earth and the dreams would stop. And so would her rule.

FIVE YEARS



With a wife by his side, Yuvanashva was finally crowned king. As the Brahmanas poured milk and water on him during the ritual consecration, they noticed how handsome he was. His shoulders were broad, his waist narrow, his

arms long. His thick long wavy hair extended right down to his hip. Yes, he is virile, thought the Brahmanas. He would father many sons.

Shilavati, however, did not let Yuvanashva rule. Court continued to meet in her audience chamber, not in the maha-sabha. When Mandavya insisted that the prince must take charge of his destiny the queen replied, ‘Why distract him from his husbandly duties? The ancestors are impatient to be reborn. Vallabhi is impatient for an heir. He needs to repay his debt to his forefathers who gave him his crown and his kingdom. There is no hurry. His inheritance is safe. I rule it well.’

Yuvanashva’s inheritance was indeed safe in the hands of Shilavati.

Those who entered Shilavati’s audience chamber, noticed on the copper plate behind her, the image of Akshya-patra, the vessel of the gods that is forever spewing out abundance. On the floor before her was the image of a turtle symbolizing the steadfastness of her rule. On the walls were paintings of lions standing proud on elephants. The elephant represented a rich and fertile kingdom; the lion represented its king, lord and master.

Who is the king of Vallabhi, wondered Mandavya. It was supposed to be Yuvanashva. ‘He is but a child,’ insisted Shilavati.

‘Old enough to wrestle bulls, hunt wild boars, capture elephants and make love to his wife all night long, but too young to rule?’

Shilavati did not respond.

Mandavya ensured that the most beautiful women of the palace waved yak-tail fly whisks every time Yuvanashva appeared in public, reminding all that the child was the consecrated king, scion of the Turuvasu clan. Shilavati, well versed in the ancient language of symbols and the demands of dharma, knew that she was restricted to use only a fan made of peacock feathers reserved for regents. She had long ago rejected the fan of matted palm leaves given to widows.

When Shilavati held court, the maids who accompanied her passed her fine slices of betel nut that she chewed with relish. This was permitted only for women whose husbands were alive. For the juice of the betel ignites the flesh. Shilavati chewed the nut nevertheless. ‘The juices ignite my mind. Help me think more clearly,’ she explained. No one stopped her.

In the months since marriage, Simantini had been bleeding with unfailing regularity. Yuvanashva’s seed did not cling to the soil. Every time this happened,

the crows' cawing became more intense. They were angry. 'The bridge across Vaitarni has collapsed once more. Shilavati, when will one of us cross over to the other side? Make it happen. There may be dharma in your kingdom, but there is no dharma in your son's bed,' said the ancestors.

Shilavati ignored them. They did not frighten her any more. 'I have done my best. Raised my son and given him a wife. Let him do the rest.'

The crows shouted, 'Does it not bother you that your son's seed is weak?'

'It is not. His seed will sprout and you will be reborn when Yama decrees it. Don't be impatient. It will get you nothing but a sore throat.'

A year later, Mandavya said, 'The Brahmana elders feel the prince should go to his wife only when her womb is ripe, for seven days after the bleeding stops. Not before. Not after.'

'Such regulation for a newly married man. My son is human not animal,' said Shilavati. 'Don't take away his dignity.'

'My queen, do you want him to father a son or not?'

Shilavati did not reply.

Yuvanashva resented the restrictions the Brahmana elders imposed upon him. He demanded an explanation but in a way felt relieved. Love-making had lost its charm. It had been reduced to a chore.

Mandavya told his son, Vipula, to talk to the prince. Vipula said, 'The bull goes to the cow only when her womb is ripe. As does the horse to the mare. But man can go to a woman anytime. This is a gift of the gods to man. Manavas enjoy the sexual act. It is no chore or obligation. But embedded in the pleasure is a duty. A duty to produce a child. Perhaps your seed is being wasted in pleasure. We need to conserve it. Restrain its flow for twenty-one days. Make it potent and spill only in the seven days of season so that it embeds itself in a ripe womb and turns into the royal sapling.'

Yuvanashva saw sense in this. He did not tell anybody but he had noticed crows perching themselves on the tree outside Simantini's bedchamber watching them make love. He had tried to shoo them away. But they were not easily scared. They stared and stared. Flapping their wings impatiently every time the foreplay got too long.

After the monthly bleeding stopped, Simantini's maids would come to Yuvanashva with a tambula, informing him that the queen's womb was ripe

ready to receive seed. He would chew the nuts, ignite his flesh and go to her. They would be together for seven days and seven nights. Then Brahmanas would come and sing hymns in the corridor outside her bedchamber. ‘Stick. Sink. Cling. Like a leech. Like a crab. Hold on as fire to wood.’ This was an indicator that the womb was no longer ripe and that the husband should leave.

It was hoped that the songs would encourage the womb to cling to the seed. For fourteen days after the fertile period the whole palace prayed for the success of the soil. But then the bleeding would start. With the blood would come tears. Simantini’s. Yuvanashva’s. Mandavya’s. And the cycle would start once again.

PRUTHALASHVA’S RENUNCIATION



Meanwhile, an old man in Mandavya’s ashram was getting restless. It was Pruthalashva, Yuvanashva’s grandfather who had moved from grihastha-ashrama to vanaprastha-ashrama even before his birth and was now eager to move into sanyasa-ashrama.

Soon after Prasenajit’s death, Pruthalashva had gifted away his cows, his horses, his gold, his silver plates and copper pots and moved to Mandavya’s hermitage where no one addressed him as king. He spent his time teaching young Kshatriya boys the art of making the perfectly balanced bow. Or he spent hours staring at the forest, his final destination.

When Yuvanashva was seven years old Shilavati visited Mandavya’s ashram and introduced him to his grandfather.

The old man looked at the young boy and then his young mother. ‘Shilavati, I hear you are a good king. Vallabhi has prospered under you. You have even organized an elephant hunt. The Kshatriya council respects you more than they respected me. And you encourage young Kshatriya warriors to hunt tigers. I have heard of the temples you are building, the fairs you are organizing, the festivals you are celebrating and the large number of pilgrims and traders you are attracting.’

Shilavati saluted the old king. ‘I know you did not want a woman to take care of your kingdom.’

‘Men are foolish. We actually believe that just because someone has a moustache they make better kings than someone with breasts. The Angirasa knew better. Mandavya knew better. I am glad I listened to them. I wish my son

had not died. But had he lived, and had he confined you to the women's quarters, as he would, in foolish male pride, Vallabhi would not be what it is today. I hear you have asked the sculptors to make a new gate for the city.'

'Yes. With the image of Ganga on one side riding a river dolphin and Yamuna on the other riding a turtle. On top is Lakshmi.'

'Where is Vishnu?'

'Here, right in front of you. We call him Yuvanashva. Your grandson.'

Pruthalashva looked at his daughter-in-law. She had a way with words. She looked so beautiful, though draped in undyed fabrics reserved for widows. A line of sandal paste stretched from the bridge of her nose across her broad forehead to where the parting of her hair would once have been. She had chosen to shave her hair and used one end of her sari to cover her tonsured head. The chain of gold coins and tiger claws round her neck gave her an air of authority, though she did not really need it.

Bending down Pruthalashva looked at his grandson and said, 'Hurry up. Grow up. Get yourself a wife and give me a great grandson. I don't have much time. The forest calls me.'

Pruthalashva waited. And waited. And waited. He heard of the swayamvara at Udra and the excitement in Vallabhi when Yuvanashva entered the city through the new gate with his new bride on his elephant. He heard of the grand marriage and the feast that lasted for twenty-seven days. He heard everything except what he wanted to hear. After five years, he grew tired. He went to Mandavya one day and said, 'Yuvanashva's seed stubbornly refuses to sprout.'

'Maybe the field is barren.'

'Surely Shilavati realizes this. Why has she not yet got him a second wife? Does she not realize that she is fettering me?' Mandavya did not reply. 'Anyway, I reject this fetter. Great grandson or no great grandson, I wish to go.'

'Please wait. See the face of Yuvanashva's son and then go.'

'Bondage takes many forms. I will not be enchanted anymore.'

All the young students and the old teachers of Mandavya's ashram sat under a great banyan tree and watched the old king set out on his last journey. At the edge of the hermitage, Pruthalashva undid his clothes. Then he picked up a lump of earth, threw it back over his shoulders, and then walked ahead without looking back. He seemed relieved to find freedom at last.

‘Maybe he will meet the Pandavas in the forest,’ said Vipula to this father. That was a possibility. After gambling away their kingdom, the five brothers and their common wife spent all their time following the trail of hermits, moving from hermitage to hermitage, meeting Rishis, talking to them, trying to make sense of their miserable lives.

‘I don’t think he will care,’ said Mandavya.

SELFISH CROWS



Mandavya informed Shilavati of her father-in-law’s departure. ‘Pruthalashva entered the third phase of his life without waiting for his grandson to be born. Now he has entered the final phase of his life without even waiting for his great grandson to be conceived. This is not good. The fabric of dharma in Vallabhi is unravelling itself.’

‘Don’t be so dramatic,’ said Shilavati. ‘The rains come on time and leave on time. The dharma of Vallabhi is intact.’

Mandavya remembered what Vipula had said when Pruthalashva walked away into the forest, ‘Here is a man in hurry to give up his throne that was always his and there is a woman clinging to the throne that was never hers.’ He had admonished his son for speaking of the queen that way. Looking at Shilavati’s nonchalance in this matter, he wondered...

‘Five years have passed. The princess of Udra has not even suffered a miscarriage. Perhaps the soil is barren; you must consider another field for the royal seed,’ said Mandavya rather forcefully.

‘Five years is not a long time. Let us be patient,’ said Shilavati chewing her betel nut and gesturing to her maids to wave the peacock fan more rapidly.

But the crows were not patient. Five years was a very long time. A loss of over sixty opportunities to be reborn. They cawed and cawed. They flapped their wings and glared impatiently in Shilavati’s dreams.

‘The wife may be barren but the mother is not,’ said one crow to another. ‘Two fields separated by a generation. What does it matter where we spring from? Maybe Shilavati should consider offering herself to a suitable man, maybe Mandavya. She still bleeds and he is not that old. Through her at least one of us can be reborn. Her husband may be dead but the field still belongs to his ancestors.’

Shilavati fell sick the next day. How could the ancestors even think like that? But they did. And they spoke their mind without guilt or shame. The dead have no feelings. No conscience. Just the intense desire to take birth once again. Rebirth. Life. Senses. Feelings.

Mandavya was acutely aware of Shilavati as a woman. Her breasts were full and hips wide. She could have borne Prasenajit many sons. If only he had not died so young.

Only once had Mandavya felt desire for the young widow queen. It had happened eight months after Yuvanashva's birth. The priests felt the royal infant should be placed on the throne to reassure the people of Vallabhi and to tell the Devas that the throne was not empty. But the child howled every time he was taken from his mother's arms. So the priests decided it was best the mother of the king sat on the throne and the king sat on her lap through the ceremony. She was told to hold the bow for her son. The silver parasol was raised behind her. The yak-tail fly whisks were waved by the most beautiful maids. Instead of the red bindi of brides on her forehead Shilavati had a vertical tilak made of sandal-paste stretching from the tip of her nose right up to her brow. It was the only indicator that she had no husband. She looked so regal, so powerful, so dignified. Everyone looked at her. She belonged on the throne. The young sixteen-year-old bride chosen by the Angirasa. No one noticed the child until he started to cry and demanded the attention of the court. 'If only she was a man,' said the Kshatirya council.

'Thank the gods that she isn't,' Mandavya heard himself say. Those who overheard him were alarmed. An embarrassed Mandavya realized Kama was shooting an arrow into his heart. He caught the arrow mid-air and broke it. 'She is like my daughter-in-law; I will not submit to the vulgar arrows of Kama,' he told himself.

Mandavya had a wife. A large dark lovable woman named Punyakshi, youngest daughter of a Vaishya elder, given away to Mandavya along with a cow and a bull, a way of marriage in keeping with the way of the Rishi.

Punyakshi knew she was a ritual tool for her husband, like his water pot and fire sticks and reed mat, a tool to explore the secrets of the cosmos and share it with the kings of Vallabhi. She accepted her fate without question. She loved the hermitage outside Vallabhi. She sat with her husband when he performed the

yagna and when he looked up at the sky to decipher the meaning of the stars. She took care of his students like a mother and offered herself to him in her fertile period. He came dispassionately, whispering, 'This is a yagna. Nothing more. Your thighs are the altar. Your passion the fire. My seed the oblation to my ancestors.' After the offering of seed, he would walk away without once caressing her.

On the night of the day Mandavya saw the young Shilavati on the throne he hugged his wife passionately. He bit into her neck and let his tongue explore her ear. He buried his face in her hair, in her breasts, between her thighs. She felt his fingers spread apart the altar. She felt herself devoured by the flames of his passion. This time, after the offering of seed, he lay with her, holding her. Punyakshi felt his tears. What secret was he hiding, she wondered. 'Let me be the vessel that will hold your venom. Let me be the churn who will purify your soul,' she whispered in his ears.

They never spoke of that night again.

Shilavati sent for Mandavya when she recovered from her illness. 'My spies tell me that the people of Vallabhi are saying that the king of Vallabhi has been denied the grace of Ileshwara because he is king in name only.'

'Yes,' said Mandavya.

'Do you think it is true?'

'I ask myself if it is your son's destiny or your desire which comes in the way of Ileshwara's grace.'

Shilavati looked straight at Mandavya, 'Tell me, if I were a man, when would I be expected to retire?'

'After your son has a son.'

'And does my son have a son?' she asked. Mandavya smiled, realizing the queen was twisting ancient laws to hold on to the throne. He remembered what the Angirasa had said about Shilavati: a girl who had never been taught the dharma-shastras but whose understanding of dharma would put all the kings of Ilavrita to shame. 'So let us be patient,' said Shilavati softly.

'Perhaps the prince is sterile, unfit to be king,' said Mandavya.

'How dare you say such a thing about my son?' Shilavati's eyes flashed fire. Then it was her turn to smile. She had underestimated the Acharya. He had trapped her. The only way to prove her son's virility was to get him another wife.

One always blames the cow first. ‘Tongues are wagging on the streets of Vallabhi no doubt. We need something to distract the people. A grand royal wedding with feasts and entertainment. Tell me, how can we quickly find a second wife for my son?’

Mandavya said, ‘The bards say that the daughter of the king of Vanga is destined to bear a son. Astrologers of Vanga, Kashi and Vallabhi have confirmed it. Her father is willing to sell her to the highest bidder. Let us bid for her.’

SECOND WIFE



It was not unknown in Ila-vrita for fathers to sell their daughters. Galava had once asked Yayati to give him a thousand black horses to pay his tuition fees. Yayati had only two hundred. Not wanting to disappoint Galava, he had said, ‘Take my daughter, Madhavi, in place of the rest. She is destined to bear four kings. Surely each one is worth two hundred horses to the men of Ila-vrita who wish to be father of kings.’

‘How much am I worth, father?’ asked Pulomi, the princess of Vanga.

The king of Vanga replied without shame or guilt, ‘You are priceless, my child, but your womb is worth seven hundred cows, three hundred bullocks and a dozen bulls.’

Pulomi burst into tears. The king of Vanga wanted to hold her, hug her, comfort her but he restrained himself. He had a kingdom to think of. A mysterious disease had killed most of the cows in his land. When cowherds squeezed udders of the surviving cows, they found blood and pus oozing out instead. The bulls had become blind and could barely stand. The bullocks were too weak to pull a plough or a cart.

‘It is the wrath of Shiva,’ declared the Brahmanas. ‘He has spat the poison in his throat into your cattle sheds. Maybe we forgot to let him partake of the leftovers of our yagna. Maybe we insulted his dogs, kicked them out without offering them milk. Until we appease him he terrorizes us. We must offer him raw unboiled milk of seven hundred cows.’

‘Where are the cows?’ asked the king of Vanga.

‘In Vallabhi. And they will come to us if you accept Shilavati’s offer.’

The king of Vanga accepted the offer. The daughter was sold. Seven hundred cows, three hundred bullocks, a dozen bulls, each one decorated with bright red

tassels and copper-plated horns made their way on great barges down the Kalindi to Vanga. The residents of Panchala who saw the passing ships told their daughters, 'That is how an Asura marries an Apsara.'

A few days later they saw another barge decorated with marigold flowers. In it sat Pulomi dressed in red and gold, accompanied by her maids and fifty Kshatriya warriors who had come all the way from Vallabhi to fetch her. The banner of the Turuvasus with the image of a turtle fluttered from the ship mast. The daughters of Panchala said, 'There goes the Madhavi of Vanga.'

OBJECT OF PLEASURE



Before the cows and bullocks and bulls left Vallabhi for Vanga, Yuvanashva had gone to Simantini. 'I will not buy her without your permission, Bharya,' he said, looking into her sad eyes.

She touched the tips of his fingers and said in a choked voice, 'I have done everything I could. Every new moon night, I am the first woman to offer jabakusuma flowers to Ileshwari. Every time I bleed, I make offerings of gold cradles to the tamarind tree in the corner room. I eat no spices and drink buttermilk to cool my body. I have talismans hanging round my neck, my arms and my waist. I have walked round the seven goddess' shrines in Tarini-pur. I have asked the priestesses of Bahugami to dance around me. But still my womb has failed to hold your seed. I have failed you Arya. You need another wife.'

'The fault could be mine,' said Yuvanashva. Every night he was haunted by a vision of hundreds of dhatura flowers, brown with age, offered by him to Ileshwara Mahadev, tumbling down as the lord who is both god and goddess looked over his shoulder at all the other men prostrating in the temple on full moon days. So many men, all fathers. And he, alone, childless, graceless, rejected by the gods.

Simantini looked at her husband with a horrified expression on her face. She put her hand on his mouth. 'Please don't say such things, Arya. You are the perfect husband. The perfect man. So tender. So gentle. So giving. No woman could ask for more. Go ahead, get yourself a new wife. A fertile field for the royal seed. She will be my sister.'

Simantini did not tell Yuvanashva what the priestesses of Bahugami said in their trance as they danced round her. Waving branches of neem, they kept

repeating in shrill hoarse voices, 'He is fertile. Yes, he is fertile. Oh yes, he is fertile. The goddess smiles upon him. He is fertile and he will have a son.' It frightened her.

Yuvanashva sensed the pain in Simantini. Her sense of invalidation. But he had to take another wife. He had to father a son. It was his duty. He was told that the Brahmanas had decided to conduct the garbhadana samskara to ensure conception. This rite of passage made the private act between husband and wife a public spectacle.

A hundred and eight sumangalis, married women who had borne sons and whose husbands were alive, stood at the gate of Vallabhi to welcome Pulomi. They blew conch-shell trumpets to ward off the malevolent spirits. They poured water on Pulomi to wash the dust of the journey and then prepared to place on her the sixteen love-charms that make a woman a bride. They anointed her with turmeric and then sandal paste. They dressed her in a fresh sari, red with a border of gold. They tied her hair and decorated it with a garland of champaka flowers. They painted her feet red with alta. They made her wear finely crafted gold jewels specially made for the occasion: toe-rings, two types of anklets, two types of cummerbands, one above the navel and one below, four types of bangles, two types of bracelets, two types of armlets, rings for all ten fingers, three types of necklaces, one binding the neck, one around the breasts, one slipping in between, nose-rings for the left, right and centre, two earrings, a hairpin, a band for the crown of the head and another for the brow.

'By the time the prince removes these jewels he will be too exhausted to do anything,' said one of the maids from Vanga.

'One look at our prince and your princess will remove all the jewellery herself,' retorted a maid from Vallabhi.

The main courtyard of the palace was lined with mango leaves and marigold flowers for the wedding. Pulomi felt alone. If only her father could be present during the ceremony where a bride's father formally gives her hand to the groom. 'This is a mere formality. The moment your father accepted Vallabhi's cattle, he had given you away. This ritual to simply tell the Devas that you have accepted Yuvanashva as your groom and they should not even think about seducing you.'

As a child, Pulomi had grown up listening to stories of Devas seducing nymphs and young girls without husbands. The bards told her once, ‘The gods exist to bring life on earth. They miss no opportunity. They carry pollen of plants and seeds of animals in every direction looking for ripe unclaimed wombs. So better tell your father to get you a groom fast before they make you pregnant or you will end up as Kunti, mother before marriage.’

Her head was bent and eyes lowered when the priest placed her hand on Yuvanashva’s palm. She did not see him when he lined the parting of her hair with red vermilion powder. She did not see him when he tied a string of beads, black as mustard seeds, round her neck. She did not see him when he placed his palm on her chest and requested her to make a place for him in her heart. She did not see him when she placed a garland round his neck and walked around the sacred fire with him. She did not see him when together they took the seven steps that makes man and woman husband and wife.

When she finally saw him, it was night. He held her chin and raised her face. She kept her eyes closed. Afraid of the Asura. ‘Open your eyes,’ he said. His voice was deep and rich and soft. She did. He looked like no Asura. He was radiant like the moon. He had brown eyes. His moustache was thick and well curled. His hair soft and long. She felt her heart beating faster. Her lips went dry. She had a deep desire to touch him. He looked so curious. So welcoming. So unthreatening. He tilted her head and kissed her. She did not know what to do. Was he not supposed to point to the Arundhati star? Was she not supposed to pretend she did not know where it was?

Outside, the priests chanted loudly so that the couple inside could hear them, ‘Now that Vishnu has prepared the field, let Brahma bring forth the seed. May Vishwakarma shape the child and Vayu breathe in the life.’ This rhythmic chant had the potent power to help the soil cling to the seed and transform it into a sapling. Farmers chanted it while sowing seed and herdsmen when they brought the bull to the cow.

Inside, Yuvanashva made love to his new wife with great care. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, soft as dough, and lively as a lotus. So different from his first wife, the only other woman he knew. This one stirred his flesh in a way Simantini never did. He could not wait for the ceremonies to end. He did not have the patience to bother with the Arundhati star. He removed her

jewels quickly, caressing her skin, kissing it, licking it, gently coaxing her juices to flow.

At first, Pulomi was embarrassed, scared, stiff. Then as she felt secure waves of feelings enveloped her. She wanted her husband to hurry up. For what, she was not sure. But she could not ignore the impatience of her flesh, the desperate desire for an unknown fulfilment. She placed her hand on his buttocks. Slowly, hesitatingly, she started to knead them.

He gasped. She stopped. He looked at her. He had never experienced this with Simantini. Being the object of pleasure. He liked the feeling. He smiled in satisfaction and then started licking her ears, burying his tongue deep, liberating her from all inhibitions. She let herself enjoy him.

The chants outside continued. Yuvanashva found them annoying. They reminded him why he had been given a new wife. At that moment, as he felt waves of pleasure with each thrust, he did not want Vishwakarma to shape anything. All he wanted was Kama to help him share the waves of pleasure with this girl who desired him as much as he desired her. She had never known the touch of a man. She wanted to explore him. He wanted to be explored. That feeling of being wanted, not by obligation, but by desire, thrilled him. This wife would surely be the favourite.

THE CORNER ROOM



A fortnight later, Pulomi bled. And she bled a month after that. And after that. The servant who conveyed the news to Simantini could barely contain her glee. Simantini's maids laughed. They hugged Simantini, assuming the news had made her happy too.

Simantini was happy. Delighted. Ecstatic, in fact. She wanted to smile. Gloat. Jeer and clap her hands. But she did not. This was not right. Such reactions were unbecoming of a queen. She remembered her mother's parting words, 'A queen is one who remains gracious even in the most ungracious of circumstances.' She was ashamed. How could she let herself be reduced to the level of her maids? How could she find pleasure in another's misery?

Pulomi's presence in the palace reminded Simantini constantly of her failure. 'Had I given my husband a child, she would not have come into this house. I

failed, she came. Now she has failed too. Will there be a third queen?' These thoughts bothered Simantini.

Simantini looked at the game of dice painted on the wall of her bedchamber. When she had seen it the first time, she had assumed she and her husband would be the only players. Then, she realized, four people could play the game. She had hoped it would be the two of them and their two children. After Pulomi's arrival she realized the two of them would play the game, enjoy the game, and she would be an unwanted extra player. Now, it seemed there would be three wives playing Yuvanashva's game of dice. A game without a winner.

Simantini realized for all her gracious conduct and trained imperiousness she had the jealous heart of a commoner. She remembered her journey to the temple of Ileshwara shortly after her marriage. The silver doors. Above the silver door was a mask of black stone. A dreaded creature with no body, only a head. Staring at all those who came seeking the grace of Ileshwara Mahadev. Sticking out his tongue. Mocking them. Jeering them. 'You may look noble. You may behave with reverence. But I know your dark thoughts and putrid emotions. I know you are pretending,' he seemed to be saying. Simantini felt the black mask come alive in front of her. Licking her face like a lizard, spitting on her, laughing at the truth that hid in her heart. Simantini did not like the vision. Perhaps this is why she was not yet mother or queen.

Pulomi did not deserve the pain of failure. No woman did. Simantini knew what it felt like to be isolated from the world for three days and three nights. She had years of experience. Restricted to the corner room of the women's quarters. Looking out from the only window in the room. Watching the tamarind tree outside. The cradles on its branches. And the high wall beyond. Doing nothing all day except watching the blood flow out of the body and wiping it from time to time. Eating uncooked food. No spices. No meat. No fish. Not even boiled milk or butter. Being forced to mourn for the child that could have been. Feeling dirty and polluted. Touched by death, shunned by the living, finding comfort and empathy only in the arms of other menstruating women.

'What does Pulomi do all day?' Simantini asked one of her maids, who shared the corner room with the junior queen for three days.

'Nothing. She just weeps uncontrollably.'

Simantini instructed her maid, ‘The next time you see her in the corner room encourage her to play dice and draw on the walls. Make her smile. Take some of my dolls with you. Give them to her. She is only fourteen.’

UNWORTHY



One day, in the audience chamber, Shilavati noticed the sadness in Yuvanashva’s face. ‘What is the matter, son?’ she asked, concerned, ‘All well?’

‘Yes,’ said Yuvanashva, not sounding too convincing. Shilavati glanced at the maids behind her and the elders in front of her. They got up and left mother and son alone.

‘Tell me. What bothers you?’ she asked, her voice full of concern.

‘I had a dream last night mother. I dreamt I was dead. On the shores of Vaitarni I saw Yama seated on a buffalo. He asked me to recount my achievements. I realized I had none. So I kept quiet. Yama walked away followed by all the kings and fathers of Ila-vrita. Only I was left behind. Alone on the wrong side of Vaitarni.’ Shilavati felt her son’s misery. Suddenly, Yuvanashva looked up and blurted out, ‘Am I like Vichitra-virya, mother? Will my wives bear children only when I am dead?’

‘Don’t say such things,’ said Shilavati.

Yuvanashva raised his voice, ‘I have two wives, mother. But no children. I hold the bow of kingship but it is you who rule Vallabhi. Even you do not think I am good enough!’

Shilavati did not reply. She looked at Yuvanashva and held his hand till he calmed down. As his breathing became steady, she said, ‘Do you feel I am denying you your birthright?’

‘No, mother,’ said Yuvanashva, looking down at her feet, hating himself for opening up this conversation. ‘I did not mean that.’

‘I have heard your friend Vipula calls me a leech.’ Yuvanashva did not look up. He was embarrassed. ‘My son,’ said Shilavati, her voice low and kind, ‘it is for your own good that I rule Vallabhi. So that you can focus on becoming a father. Don’t let your friends distract you with their petty wicked thoughts. I am your mother. Custodian of your inheritance. No one loves you as much as I do. Who will think of your welfare if not I? Who will think of your wives’ happiness

if not you? Have you asked the two girls how they feel when servants shun them in the morning because they are barren?’

‘No,’ said Yuvanashva softly.

‘You must give them attention, Yuva. Make them happy. It is their battle as much as yours. Win it together. You are husband first, then king. Vallabhi is going nowhere. You have your whole life ahead of you to rule.’

THE ASTROLOGER



Three years after Pulomi came to Vallabhi, Yuvanashva travelled on a barge down the Kalindi to Kashi, the famed city at the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, to consult the most respected astrologer in Ila-vrita. ‘Is there anything, or anyone, preventing me from becoming a father?’ he asked the great astrologer.

The great astrologer sat in a vast circular hall where the walls were covered with paintings of the twenty-seven star goddesses, known as Nakshatras, who dance on the rim of the celestial sphere. From the roof hung tapestries with images of the nine planet gods, known as Grahas, whose movements into the arms of the Nakshatras and out of them reflected the account books of Yama. Without raising his head from the birth charts, the great astrologer said, ‘No.’

‘Is there any need for a ritual? Maybe an offering to Shani, lord of Saturn, who delays things?’ asked an anxious Yuvanashva.

‘No.’

‘Maybe a prayer to Shukra, lord of Venus, who makes a man potent?’

‘No.’

‘Should I wear a gem on my finger or around my neck?’

‘No. No. No,’ said the great astrologer raising his head. ‘There is no need to do anything. No gems, no rituals, no chants. Just be patient.’ Yuvanashva sensed the great astrologer’s irritation. He withdrew.

The Grahas and Nakshatras admonished the astrologer of Kashi for being sharp with the king of Vallabhi. ‘He comes to you because he is unhappy and lost; don’t add to his misery,’ they whispered. Unseen by mortal eyes these gods and goddesses who play with time revealed to the astrologer that Yuvanashva was a great white horse, much loved by the Devas, but his path was blocked by an equally loved cow-elephant.

As Yuvanashva prepared to leave, the great astrologer of Kashi spoke in a voice that was softer and kinder. ‘Have faith, O lord of Vallabhi. It is foretold that you will be father of a Chakra-varti. The stars speak less of life now and more of death. Mangala, the lord of the planet Mars, is gaining power. He is filling Ila-vrita with aggression, righteous indignation, outrage and the desire for vengeance. Soon everyone will be angry. And in anger no one will listen to sound counsel. There will be no compromise. Men will kill each other. The earth will be drenched in blood. Then, only then, will the skies clear and children will be born. Yours. Your wife’s. And those of the Pandava widows.’

Discontented with the intangible answers of the sky-gods, Yuvanashva decided to take the more tangible help of the earth-goddesses. On his return from Kashi, he sent for Matanga.

THE DOCTOR



Matanga was a Brahmana, well-versed in the art of health and healing, who lived in Tarini-pur, a village located a day’s journey from Vallabhi. Matanga knew all the secrets of herbs and minerals taught to the great Chyavana by the earth-goddesses known as Matrikas. ‘Help me,’ said Yuvanashva. ‘Make me a father.’

Matanga replied, ‘I will try my best. When the juice of man is weak, it indicates disharmony. Disproportion between the wind, fire and water which animates our body. With the help of herbs and minerals, their oils and essences, I will restore harmony in your body and that of your wives. The rest we leave to the grace of the Matrikas.’

Matanga and his son, Asanga, were given a courtyard in the palace. There they spent the day pounding herbs, grinding leaves, grating bark and mixing them in various pots of aromatic oils, some warm, some cold, all the while chanting hymns that evoked the magical Gandharvas, whose music made the juices flow.

At night, two potions would be sent to the two queens. Bitter on one day and sweet the next.

At dawn, Asanga would massage the body of the king. While massaging, he would wear an emerald ring and chant, ‘May this energize your seed, make it potent, propel it like an arrow leaving Prajapati’s quiver for its mark’.

And when it was time to go to his queens, the king would be told to wear a coral ring on his right index finger. The queens would hold a betel leaf and wear pearls round their neck.

‘The energy of herbs, the oils, the hymns and the gems will work together to make the king’s seed cling to the soil,’ said Matanga.

Matanga allowed Yuvanashva to be with his wives only on the second, fourth and sixth night after the bleeding had stopped. ‘Conception on the first, third and seventh days leads to the conception of girls. We don’t want that. Conception on the seventh day leads to the conception of a child who is neither male nor female. We don’t want that either. We want a boy, a king,’ he said. ‘And when you are with your wife, hold her thumb. That will make her red seed weak and ensure your white seed is strong. That is necessary to father a son. Don’t hold her little finger. That will make her red seed strong and you will end up with a daughter. Daughters are delightful, but for you, my king, they are not yet desirable.’

After the sixth day, Yuvanashva was not allowed to see Pulomi. He would be made to wait until Simantini’s womb was ripe. When she was ready, she too would wait with the betel leaf in her hand and pearls round her neck. He would perform the rite of conception on alternate nights, holding her thumb, and then wait to go to Pulomi.

Yuvanashva felt he had lost his freedom. He was reduced to being a performing bull in the royal cowshed. A pathetic sterile bull. But he had to endure this, if he wished to be father and truly king.

Three years passed. The massage, the hymns, the herbs, the gems and the potions failed to show any effect. The bleeding continued.

Simantini and Pulomi dreaded the day when blood seeped out of their bodies. In no time word spread from the inner chambers to the outer courtyards, across the city square, through the sacrificial halls and the gymnasiums and the cattle sheds and workshops, making its way into the fields, the orchards, the pastures and finally the highways. The crows would caw in the palace courtyards and Shilavati would lock herself in her chambers, trying to block them out. Gloom would descend on the whole palace. No lamps would be lit. No sweets would be cooked. The queens would not show their face to anyone in embarrassment.

Yuvanashva, after a moment's silence, would ask Asanga when the next queen would be ready.

‘Perhaps it is time to consider niyoga,’ said Mandavya to Shilavati. The process was simple. Get another man, approved by the husband, to go to the wife. The man had to be virgin, preferably one so evolved that he was totally detached from his body and derived no pleasure from the act.

Mandavya watched Shilavati take a deep breath. ‘Are you so eager to be with my daughters?’ she said.

Mandavya lowered his head and replied softly, ‘If I were such a man, then it would not be the king’s wives that I would crave.’ Shilavati felt a quivering in her womb. She heard the cawing of crows. A year ago her womb had withered; she was not sure she was relieved or disappointed.

Outside the palace, Vipula heard the bards telling pilgrims a story: ‘The elder brother could not be king because he was blind; so they crowned his younger brother instead. He had a wife. A beautiful wife, fertile for sure, for everyone knew she had a child before marriage. She went to his bed willingly, of her own free will, but did not bear him any children. If a cow does not get pregnant, you don’t blame the royal bull, do you? You get another cow. So a second wife was bought, an expensive wife with child-bearing hips. Forced into his bed, even she did not bear a child. Now it was time to blame the bull. But before that was done, the bull ran away. As fast as he could. Out of the palace and into the forest. To hunt deer, he told his wives. He released an arrow and shot a sage standing behind his wife as a mating buck stands behind a doe. Before dying, the angry sage cursed the king: If you spill seed again you will surely die. What a convenient curse! A valid excuse for the younger brother to stay out of his wives’ bed. No one will now know the truth of the royal bull, pale above as below, as unfit as his elder brother to be king. And the poor wives. They will never share the secret of their bed. What else could they do but follow the king to the forest and spread themselves before strange gods like cows in a temple shed?’

Two wives. One willing and one purchased. Who were they talking about? Kunti and Madri or Simantini and Pulomi? As pale above as below? Were they referring to Pandu of Hastina-puri or...

An outraged Vipula went to Matanga's courtyard and paced up and down. 'The bards are up to mischief once again,' he said, 'They mock the king publicly. Encouraged by his mother, no doubt. Say, when two cows have no calves, it is time to call the bull a bullock.'

'The king is certainly not impotent. His genitals are intact and function well. And his seed is certainly not unhealthy. It is white as cream. Thin though, despite all my potions,' Matanga clarified rather clinically.

Vipula did not want to know how Matanga reached these conclusions. He was happy to know his friend was no bullock. 'Any aspersions on the king's virility threatens his rule. I am worried. If I had my way, I would rip out the tongues of these bards.'

'To hurt a bard is against dharma,' said Matanga. 'You know that better than I do. They are the keepers of Ila-vrita's memory.'

'More like twisters of memory,' said Vipula scowling. Then he looked at Matanga, 'Niyoga would mean my king is a failure. Vichitra-virya allowed it only after he was dead. And Pandu did it in secret. Here it would be public. It will devastate Yuvanashva. Strip him of all self-confidence. That is what his mother wants. That leech. Is there nothing else you can do?'

'Perhaps, when the red soil is not good enough for the seed, one has to plant it in black soil, a womb so strong that it can hold even the weakest of seeds.'

'Are you suggesting an anuloma wedding?' asked Vipula.

According to the rules of marriage, women of Ilavrita were allowed to marry only men belonging to their varna. A Brahmana could only marry a Brahmana and Shudra could only marry a Shudra. Sometimes, for the sake of progeny, the Rishis allowed the anuloma marriage. This meant letting a man belonging to a higher varna marry a girl belonging to a lower varna. Yayati had an anuloma wedding. From an Asura wife, he had fathered the Yadus, Kurus and Turuvasus. Shantanu had married a fisherwoman and she had given him Vichitra-virya. A pratiloma wedding, where a woman of a higher varna married a man of a lower varna, was forbidden. Yuvanashva, being a Kshatriya, could marry a Vaishya or a Shudra but not a Brahmana. For, as the Rishis sang, 'The Brahmana makes up the head of the organism that is society, the Kshatriya the arms, the Vaishya the trunk and the Shudra the feet.'

'Why not?' said Matanga.

Why not indeed? Not an ideal solution but better than niyoga. Vipula himself was a product of an anuloma union: his father was Brahmana, his mother Vaishya. 'Let us select a Shudra girl quickly. A weaver's daughter, maybe. Or a carpenter's. Or a potter's. Yes, they do have strong wombs. They breed like rats.'

'I know just the girl,' said Matanga.

THE POTTER'S DAUGHTER



A few weeks later, four Kshatriya elders travelled from Vallabhi to Tarini-pur and headed straight to the potter's house. They came bearing gifts from Shilavati: six gold pots, each filled with honey, six finely woven red saris for the women of the household, six bullock carts piled with spices and grain, six pairs of tusks and six tiger-skin rugs, an indicator that the potter would soon be related to the royal family.

The potter of Tarini-pur could not believe his fortune. His daughter, Keshini, had been chosen to be Yuvanashva's third wife. He thanked Matanga profusely.

The following day, six women arrived with servants bearing richly carved boxes. They were palace maids dressed better than the wife of the village chief. They had gold nose-rings and walked with an arrogance that comes with living in the same house as the king. Behind them was a palanquin carried by eight men. The children ran in front shouting, 'It has silver bells on the sides.'

The palace maids bathed Keshini with sandal water and went about transforming her into a royal bride. Keshini, used to silver and copper ornaments, was struck by the shine of gold. 'Her wrists are too thick,' muttered one of the palace maids as she struggled to slip a bangle up Keshini's wrist. 'These bangles are meant for princesses who have never done a day's work with their hands.' The other maids hid a smile. Keshini's mother, who sat next to her, ignored the gibe.

A crowd gathered outside the potter's house. Everyone wanted to see the village girl who would be queen. The village elders said, 'When the great flood devastated our village fourteen years ago, the queen of Vallabhi rushed to our rescue like a mother running towards an injured child: she helped us rebuild our homes and repair our temples, she gave us cows and bulls and seeds and tools to restart our life. Now one of our daughters will go to her palace. What better way

to repay our debt to her. A daughter who will keep the royal lamp aflame. May the seven goddesses of Tarini-pur bless her, make her womb rich and fertile.'

'Praise be to Shilavati,' shouted the priests of Tarini-pur.

'Praise be to Shilavati,' shouted the rest of Tarini-pur.

When Keshini emerged from the house, everyone's eyes widened in delight. She was so different from the Keshini they knew. Covered in gold, painted with sandal paste, she looked like a goddess. There was no sign of the tattoos. The jewellery was so heavy that she could barely walk. Fine patterns of flowery creepers were painted on her forehead with sandal paste by the palace maids.

Keshini's mother put a betel nut leaf in her hand and her father picked her up and put her on the palanquin. The wives of weavers draped over her a sheer red cloth. The Brahmana women sang songs of parting. The Kshatriya women blew conch shells. The Vaishya women gave the palace maids baskets of fruit and grain to take back with them. 'So that food of our village becomes part of the royal kitchen,' they said.

As the palanquin rose the entire village wept.

But nobody wept as much as Matanga. For by prescribing this marriage, the royal doctor had broken his own son's heart.

'For his own good,' Matanga's wife kept repeating but it did not seem so.

For months, Matanga and his wife had watched Asanga stand at the gate of their house impatient to see Keshini who accompanied her father when he came to deliver the pots specially designed to pour medicated potions. He was clearly in love. He had even refused to go to Panchala and fetch his bride despite many messages from his father-in-law informing them that she had matured. 'Not until you let me marry Keshini,' he told his parents.

'A Shudra daughter-in-law? Never,' said his mother.

Matanga had tried to make peace between mother and son. He told her that her disdain towards Shudras was against dharma; it would unravel the social fabric eventually. 'No varna is higher or lower than others. Let our son marry the potter's daughter, if that makes him happy.'

'Keep your speeches to yourself,' screamed his stubborn wife, determined to have her way. 'If all varnas are the same would you let your daughter marry a potter's son?'

When Matanga was summoned to the palace, his wife insisted he take Asanga with him. ‘Distance may be the cure for his love.’ But distance only intensified Asanga’s longing.

It was while talking to Vipula that Matanga realized that he could, with one stroke, help the king and restore peace in own household. That is why he had prescribed the anuloma wedding, with Keshini as the bride.

But when the wedding plans were announced, all joy left Asanga’s face. His face wrinkled in sorrow. Matanga felt like a monster. He remembered the small terracotta images of a goddess called Lajja-gauri found in the kitchen gardens and fields across Ila-vrita. Spread-eagled as if to receive a lover or deliver a child, Lajja-gauri’s face was always covered with a lotus.

‘Beneath the lotus is a flirtatious eye with which she enchants and sharp fangs with which she kills. She is the forest, wild and free, life-giver and life-taker. We have to control her, gag her blood-soaked mouth with a lotus. Bind her hair, turn the naked Kali into bedecked Gauri. How else will we make her accept only our seed and give the harvest that will feed only our children?’ the Vaishyas sang every time they burnt down a forest to establish a field or ripped a riverbank to make a canal or castrated a bull to make a bullock.

Matanga felt he had created two Lajja-gauris. Asanga and Keshini. Beneath the lotus were the tears of a loveless marriage. A Brahmana boy’s body would be offered to a Brahmana bride of his mother’s choice. And a Shudra girl’s body would be offered to the king on his doctor’s advice.

KESHINI IN THE PALACE



After a long and giddy journey through forests, orchards and fields, the royal palanquin raced through the city gate of Vallabhi, its streets and squares, past the temple of Ileshwara and the lion-gate of the palace. It then crossed the elephant-gate reserved for queens of the Turuvasu household and stopped in the courtyard of the queens.

As Keshini stepped out, she was received by more palace maids. They washed her feet, and took her to the audience chamber of Shilavati. The queen looked magnificent on her tiger-skin rug. She gave her new daughter-in-law many gifts. Then asked her if she had eaten. Keshini shook her head. The queen glanced at the maids who immediately led Keshini to an adjacent room and fed her all her

favourite dishes. Keshini had heard many things about the mother of the king. She was not like that at all. She is rather nice, Keshini concluded.

As the sun was about to set, Keshini was then taken to a vast chamber where hundreds of lamps descended from the ceiling. ‘They will make your gold sparkle when the king looks upon you,’ said one of them. On the floor over a cane mat was a bed covered with red cloth. Next to it was a pot of water, flowers and a plate of betel leaves and betel nuts. She was made to sit on the bed. Two of the maids who had come to her house sat beside her on the floor. They massaged her tired limbs with perfumed oils. She could not believe she was in the palace. Was this a dream? The fragrance of camphor and champaka flowers filled the room. Yes, this is a dream. Let it not end.

The door opened. Keshini looked up expecting the king. Instead there were two women. One tall and graceful, the other short but extremely beautiful. ‘Your husband’s other wives,’ whispered one of the maids who then bowed her head reverentially before the two queens.

Keshini was about to do the same when the other maid held her back. ‘No, not you. You too are queen.’

The beautiful one held her chin and said. ‘So this is the one with the superior womb?’ Keshini did not understand. No one replied. Keshini smiled. The queen did not smile back. Keshini felt like an unwelcome guest.

‘Here, for you,’ said the taller queen, A leaf shaped box made of silver containing lamp black and mixed with aromatic butter. ‘To line your eyes,’ she said with a warm smile. ‘Don’t be afraid. The king is very considerate.’ Keshini noticed her eyes were kind. She felt welcomed once again.

When the queens left, she asked the maids, ‘Where is the fire altar? Who is the priest? When will the ritual be held?’

‘No ritual needed. A consecrated king does not need the permission of the gods,’ explained the maid.

Keshini waited and waited. She dozed off.

‘Get up, the king is here,’ she heard the maid shout. She opened her eyes. The maids pulled her up, arranged her clothes, put a fresh garland of flowers round her neck and left the room. She remembered what her mother had told her. ‘He will ask you to point out the Arundhati star.’ She got up from the mattress and

ran to the window. The sky looked so different from the sky in her village. She craned her neck looking for the star.

THE KING IS 'DEAD'



It was the dead of the night. The whole city slept. Keshini tiptoed out of the wedding chamber, trying hard not to let her jewellery tinkle. The lamps had died out. The sky was dark. All was quiet. Only the soft snoring of palace women filled the corridors. Keshini was scared. Everything was unfamiliar. A strange house with so many corners and corridors and walls covered with gigantic images of Kama and his Apsaras. She walked slowly, not knowing where to go. She peeped into the room across the courtyard. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she recognized the woman sleeping on the bed: it was the tall queen with kind eyes, who had given her the leaf-shaped box with lamp black for her eyes. Next to her, on the floor, were two maids. She crept inside, reached the bed and softly tapped the queen on her ankle.

'What?' asked Simantini, half asleep. She usually slept lightly, especially on nights she knew her husband was with someone else. She opened her eyes, raised her head, and tried to see who was caressing her feet. Her eyes widened as she recognized the new queen. 'What are you doing here?' she asked, getting up quickly. Keshini's eyes were wide. She spoke but no words left her lips. 'What happened?' asked Simantini coming close to her. The girl looked frightened. This was her wedding night. What had happened? Simantini feared the worst.

'The king is dead,' said Keshini, trembling like a leaf.

'What?' said Simantini.

'The king is dead,' Keshini said again. 'He is lying still and I have tried waking him several times. But he does not move. I am sure he is dead.'

Simantini rushed out of her room into the new queen's chamber, dragging Keshini behind her. She did not want to wake up anybody. What had this potter's daughter done?

Inside, she found Yuvanashva sleeping, eyes shut, looking peaceful, his chest moving up and down gently. She shut her eyes and gave a sigh of relief. 'He is dead, isn't he?' asked Keshini, looking up at her.

'Stop saying that. He is just asleep.'

‘But he is so still and he did not wake up when I shook his hand and pulled his hair.’

Simantini looked at the little girl, not sure whether to be shocked or amused. She noticed that Keshini was fully decked out. The flower garland had been squashed but it was still around her neck as it was around the king’s. And his dhoti was knotted. And the bed was not crumpled. Keshini’s nose-ring had not been removed. And the sandal paste patterns on her forehead were intact. Simantini frowned. Crinkled her forehead. Something was not right. ‘What actually happened here tonight? Tell me everything.’

‘Okay,’ said Keshini, smiling broadly, glad to have someone to talk to, relieved that her husband was not dead. ‘When he came in I was looking out the window looking for the Arundhati star. He must have been standing there for some time for I found him staring at me when I turned around. I told him the sky looks different from the sky in my village. He smiled. He sat on the bed. I sat next to him. “Are you afraid?” he asked and I said, “Of what?” and he said, “Of me?” and I said, “Should I be?” and he said, “You know who I am?” and I said, “You are my husband and I have to show you a star tonight.” Then he said, “And?” and I said, “And what?” and then he said, “Do you want to sit close to me?” and I said “I want to sit on your lap”. He let me. Then he kept staring at me. I kept staring at him. He looked into my eyes. And I looked into his. He did not blink. So I did not blink. Then I got bored of staring so I twirled his moustache and told him my father’s moustache was thicker and longer. I don’t think he liked what I said. Then he gave me a slice of betel nut. I put it in my mouth. It filled my mouth and was bitter. I spat it out. He looked at me strangely. I thought he was angry. Then he smiled and said, “Tell me about yourself?” and I said, “What do you want to know?” and he said, “About your village, your family, your house. Everything”. And so I told him all that I could remember. I told him about my house, our courtyard and the potter’s wheel that I was not allowed to touch and where my father made pots and the furnace in our courtyard and the pit where I and my mother made clay and my brothers who loved throwing clay on me and the strange pots my father made for the doctor that I carried to his house every morning and the doctor’s son who had left the village and now lived in the palace.’ Keshini paused, ‘That’s when he looked at me curiously and asked, “You know Asanga?” and I said, “Of course. He always

waits at the gate of his father's house every morning when I bring in the pots in the morning. He looks at me strangely. And wants to talk to me. But I don't like talking to him." Talking about Asanga was so boring so I changed the topic and told him of the seven-goddess' shrines of my village, of the neem tree on whose branches is tied the sacred swing for the goddess in springtime and in autumn. I told him of the pots we bake for the temple, of the new pond in the village and the Brahmana boys who bathe there and one of them who everyone calls "donkey" though I don't know why, and the girls who get into trouble when they steal flowers from Trigarta's garden, and the little goat who slips into my house sometimes and breaks the pots, and the fair that is held each year after the rains, and the...'

Simantini felt her eyes growing heavy with sleep. Keshini kept talking and talking. But Simantini heard nothing. That did not stop Keshini. She kept chattering. Simantini realized how the king had 'died'. She too was on the verge of 'dying'. 'Are you hungry?' she said forcing herself awake, widening her eyes, straightening her back.

Keshini stopped. Then smiled. 'Yes. I have eaten nothing since meeting the queen. They told me I have to fast. And I told them...'

'I know. I know. Just keep quiet and I will give you some food.'

Simantini got up and Keshini followed her to the palace kitchen. A vast hall full of vessels and vegetables and pots and pans and stoves. There was someone moving inside. 'Who is that?' asked Simantini in a firm voice.

'It is me, sister. I was hungry. Did not want to wake up anyone.' Simantini recognized Pulomi's voice. She always ate when she was upset.

'What did you find?'

'Lots of food. Sweets mostly. Prepared for the morning feast.'

'Now you have two more mouths to feed.'

Pulomi came out of the kitchen carrying a vessel of sweetmeats. 'Two?' She then noticed the little girl next to Simantini. She looked at Simantini curiously.

'Don't ask,' warned Simantini, afraid the child-bride would start talking again.

Keshini did not look at either of them. She peered into the kitchen. 'Oh my. This is bigger than my whole house. And there are so many pots here and pans and ... Oh look.'

Simantini and Pulomi watched Keshini run into the kitchen and come out with a bamboo basket. In it were mangoes. Sweet, juicy mangoes. Keshini smiled. Her teeth were like pearls. Her eyes wide with excitement. Pulomi stifled a giggle. Simantini's heart melted in maternal affection.

That night, while the palace slept, and the city slept, and Yuvanashva lay 'dead' on his wedding bed, his three wives sat outside the kitchen and sucked on the sweetest of Vallabhi's mangoes.

FRIENDS



Although she was given her own courtyard with a pond attached to it, Keshini preferred staying with Simantini. Simantini treated Keshini like a daughter, braiding her hair, bedecking her with jewels and cooking food for her. Keshini liked this very much. She also enjoyed playing dice.

Simantini showed her the game of dice that had won her heart long ago. 'Four people can play this game,' exclaimed Keshini.

'Yes, but two are enough,' said Simantini.

'But are we not four?'

'Four?'

'You, me, the king and the middle queen. We can all play together. It will be fun.'

Simantini found the idea outrageous. She organized a game and invited both Pulomi and the king to participate. To her surprise both came, Pulomi because she liked Keshini's incessant chatter, Yuvanashva because he had nothing else to do. They played all night. The king and his three queens. And they had fun. By the time the sun rose, they were friends. Laughing and fighting over the rules of the game. It was a long time since the palace had heard such laughter. It scared the crows away.

The king allowed clay to be brought into the new queen's courtyard for Keshini. At first everyone found the idea of a queen playing with clay disgusting. Then the clay turned into dolls. Kings, queens, monkeys and pigs, Ganga on her dolphin, Vishnu on his hawk, Shiva and Shakti on the bull called Nandi, the goddess Tarini and her seven handmaidens, the Matrikas, and their warrior son, Agneya, riding a peacock. She made dolls for the king, for the first queen and the second queen. She made dolls for her maids and the cooks who

assisted in the kitchens and the guards who claimed it was for their children but kept it secretly for themselves. She even made an elaborate doll for Shilavati. Indra seated on his elephant. Shilavati could not hold back a smile.

‘Let us play hide-and-seek,’ said Keshini one day.

‘Let’s,’ said Yuvanashva, indulgently.

And so they hid behind pillars and tapestries. The king was blindfolded. The queens ran through corridors trying to catch each other. They screamed and yelled and tumbled over pots and pans. The old servants rolled their eyes. The young ones clapped their hands and cheered enthusiastically.

Shilavati asked her servant, ‘What’s all this commotion?’

The servant replied, ‘The king is playing with his wives, Devi.’

‘Oh,’ said the queen, scowling.

‘You are not letting him rule. At least let him have fun,’ said Mandavya, trying hard not to smile.

It was while playing hide-and-seek that Keshini one day fell into the arms of Yuvanashva. She felt his strong arms around her waist. She realized she did not want him to let go. He kissed her neck and nibbled her ears. She moaned. His hand stretched down below her navel and between her thighs. Simantini ran into the room with Pulomi. They saw their husband making love to his new wife. Both withdrew quietly. Somehow, neither felt anger or jealousy. Simantini looked at the tamarind tree of the corner room across the wall and the cradles hanging on its branches. ‘Let us hope she bears him a son.’

‘Yes,’ said Pulomi. ‘Let us hope she makes our husband truly king.’

But this did not happen. Like Simantini and Pulomi, Keshini bled month after month.

Yuvanashva found himself going to three ripe wombs as the moon waxed and waned. He looked forward to those few days when he was under no such obligation. On those days, he would go to the maha-sabha alone, sit on the throne, hold the bow and imagine the day the elders of the four varnas would bow before him out of genuine respect and not merely in ceremony.

HIS BROTHER’S BREATH



Two years passed. The Pandavas completed their thirteenth year in exile, having spent the final year disguised as servants of Virata, king of Matsya,

stripped of their identity and dignity. Now it was time to return to Indra-prastha. But the Kauravas went back on the terms of the agreement. They refused to give Indraprastha back. Krishna tried to negotiate peace. Five villages for five brothers, he offered. 'No, not a needlepoint of territory,' said the Kauravas, declaring war. Invitations were sent by the two sides to all the kings of Ila-vrita to join them in Kuru-kshetra.

Yuvanashva wanted to go. But when he saw his mother's look of disapproval, he said, 'I will not go. Not until I father a child.'

Later, he opened his heart to Vipula, 'I cannot pretend any more. The fields are fertile. It is the bull who is at fault. It is time to consider niyoga.'

Vipula was very familiar with niyoga. When his younger brother had expressed his wish to join the Angirasa, their father had said, 'First you need a wife.'

'No need for a wife,' Vipula had said rather magnanimously, knowing how his brother yearned to be free of all family fetters. 'All he needs to do is father a child. For that he can go to my wife in her fertile period when I am away on pilgrimage. Then, when she bears him a son he can walk away as Kardama did when Kapila was born.'

Vipula went on a pilgrimage. When he returned a year later, his wife was with child and his brother had left to join the Angirasa. 'My son,' he said with a smile when the child was born. 'Fatherhood,' he informed his mother, 'is kindled in the heart, not in the womb.'

But later, when he was alone and he saw the child in his wife's arms, all erudition vanished. He felt a deep resentment against his brother. Anger. A sense of violation. The field was his but the fruit was not. It strained forever the relationship between him and his wife. They were strangers. When he kissed her, he felt his brother's breath on her lips.

'Easier said than done,' said Vipula to Yuvanashva. 'Would you really like a stranger to touch your wives?'

'Perhaps a friend,' said Yuvanashva, looking at Vipula.

'Even a brother is a stranger when it comes to your wife,' said Vipula bowing to his friend, honoured by the suggestion.

'They accept me when I go to other women,' argued Yuvanashva.

'Are you sure, Arya?'

Yuvanashva thought for a moment. He remembered the look of despair in Simantini's eyes. The envy in Pulomi's. 'I guess, they have got used to it.'

'Will you get used to the idea that your wives have been with other men?'

'No,' said Yuvanashva, 'I cannot bear the thought. I am frightened. What if they feel humiliated, violated? But do we have a choice, Vipula? I am not allowed to rule Vallabhi. I am not allowed to fight in Kuru-kshetra. I spend all day playing with my wives. All night making love to them. What kind of a life am I leading? I feel worthless, useless, a burden. I need that child. Find me a man who can perform niyoga as it should be performed, dispassionately.'

'There is no such man,' said Vipula.

'Maybe the Angirasa? Rishis are not supposed to have such feelings.'

The image of his younger brother, now of the Angirasa order, flashed before Vipula's eyes. 'Oh really,' he said sarcastically. 'Why then do they shun the company of women?'

YAGNA



Unable to bear Yuvanashva's anguish, Vipula rallied the younger members of the Kshatriya and Brahmana councils. 'Who says a king must father children before he is allowed to rule? Ajaputra was king of Ayodhya before his three wives bore him four sons. These are just excuses that enables Shilavati to cling to power. The Pandava exile is over but the widow's reign continues,' he said.

The words stung. Shilavati was angry. Widow? Was that all she was? 'If they want to change the rules then even I can demand the changing of rules. Have I not earned the right to have the ivory parasol over my head, the golden bow of kingship in my hand, and the yak-tail fly whisks by my side?' she told Mandavya.

'Please don't let anyone hear these thoughts,' advised Mandavya. 'There are many who resent you. They are convinced that you are using sorcery to make your son sterile.'

'Do you believe them?' asked Shilavati.

'No one believes them. But I really think your ambition is getting the better of you. Your son's inability to father a child serves you well. It is time for you to step down with grace,' said Mandavya, his heart going out to the girl he had brought to Vallabhi from Avanti. Her purpose had been served. She *had* to let go.

‘No,’ said Shilavati, her voice as firm as her resolve, ‘I will enter vana-prastha ashrama only when my son has a son. To retire earlier will be against dharma.’

At long last Vipula came up with an idea. ‘It has come from the bards,’ he told Yuvanashva. ‘You see, even niyoga may fail. But this cannot.’

Shilavati’s throat went dry when Yuvanashva shared with her Vipula’s idea. The crows cawed. The Pitrs raised concerned voices, ‘Beware. Beware of what is being suggested. That path is fraught with danger. It involves manipulating many forces of the universe, tossing of many elements, rousing reluctant spirits, compelling the gods to do man’s bidding, using the arrows of Kama to rewrite the account book of Yama. Such an action has many repercussions. One error and everyone involved could end up paying a terrible price. It could kill the queens, or worse, the king. Stop him, Shilavati. Stop him. Even we fear this bridge.’

‘I forbid it,’ said Shilavati. ‘I will not let you put your life in danger.’

‘You can stop me from ruling Vallabhi, mother,’ cried Yuvanashva. ‘You can stop me from fighting at Kurukshetra. But please do not stop me from creating a child.’

‘What is being suggested is sorcery.’

‘If it was good enough for Drupada, it is good enough for me,’ shouted Yuvanashva. Then he bowed his head and spoke apologetically, ‘But if you forbid it, then it shall not be done.’

Shilavati’s heart wept. Her head screamed. How could he be so dutiful when she was so cruel? She thought of her brother, the songs he never sang after he became king. And her husband who so loved to hunt. And her father-in-law who could not wait to give up the throne. Obedient brothers. Obedient sons. Unhappy brothers. Unhappy sons. From across the Vaitarni, Prasenajit admonished his wife, ‘Let go. Let our son be father. Let our son be king.’

‘Oh Yuva, do as you wish,’ said Shilavati finally. ‘In your happiness, lies mine.’

Book Three



THE INVITATION



Yaja and Upayaja were two Siddhas. Magicians. Alchemists. Sorcerers. Yaja always sat under a banyan tree and sought truth in stillness. Upayaja always sat before a waterfall and sought truth in movement.

Yaja said, ‘By observing the flow of rasa, one can train the mind to accept destiny. This is the purpose of life.’

Upayaja argued, ‘By manipulating the flow of rasa, one can change the world and fructify all desires. That’s the true purpose of life.’

Both were students of Adi-natha, the teacher of teachers. Yaja had sat to the right of the teacher of teachers, Upayaja to the left. For Yaja, Adi-natha was an ascetic, a man, who sat on the northern mountain. For Upayaja, Adi-natha was an enchantress, a woman, who swam in a southern river.

The two agreed on nothing.

And yet, they always took the same decisions and did the same things, as they had thirty years earlier when they both agreed to perform Drupada’s yagna.

Together they chanted the hymns, together they churned the fire, together they created the potion, and together they created the twins, who Yaja claimed were the spawns of destiny and Upayaja claimed were the offsprings of desire.

‘Help the king of Vallabhi become a father too,’ said Vipula when he came to the banyan tree next to the waterfall.

‘Yes, we will,’ said Yaja and Upayaja in unison, without a moment’s hesitation, as if they were waiting for the invitation.

Vipula was surprised at how easy it was. He had spent the long journey through the woods thinking of all the arguments it would take to convince Yaja and Upayaja to perform the ritual. The bards had warned them that the Siddhas were whimsical and stubborn. They were driven by a force that defied all logic.

That force, taking the form of Yama, had informed Yaja long ago that he was destined to perform a yagna for the king of Vallabhi. The very same force, taking the form of Kama, had drawn Upayaja’s attention to the ripples in rasa created by Yuvanashva’s intense desire to be father. Destiny and desire had thus come together to make the moment as it was supposed to be.

Yaja said, ‘We will make the potion that will give your king a son but be warned of its consequences. As we speak, the drums of war can be heard across Ilavrita. Draupadi waves her unbound hair. Dhristadhyumna sharpens his sword. Shikhandi weeps like a woman as he lies in the embrace of his wife. The seed of Drupada’s yagna is slowly bearing fruit. What will be the consequences of your yagna, we wonder?’

‘The crows will fall silent, Shilavati will step aside and Yuvanashva will finally rule Vallabhi,’ said Vipula.

‘Are you really sure?’ asked Upayaja. Vipula felt the Siddha’s piercing eyes. Uncertainty crept into his heart. And fear. Before he could react, the Siddha got up. ‘Let us make haste and reach Vallabhi before hordes of Kshatriyas block the highways as they rush towards Kuru-kshetra.’

As the royal chariot rolled towards Vallabhi, Yaja looked towards the sky and saw vultures moving north. ‘It is a good time to do a yagna,’ he said, ‘The earth has spread her tongue to receive the blood of kings. Satiated, she will be generous, give us anything we want. The queen of Vallabhi will get that grandson she is not sure she wants.’

‘Maybe even two,’ said Upayaja.



It was the darkest time of the year. The days were short and cold. The nights long and covered with mist. The skies were clear because the monsoon had long been over. This year the sacrifice of animals that followed the autumn harvest had not satisfied the earth. She was thirsty still.

In Vallabhi, meanwhile, the two Siddhas had given elaborate instructions to set up the yagna-shala, ‘Put archers in every corner so that no bird flies overhead and contaminates the altar. There must be cattle sheds to the east and horse stables to the west. Elephants must be kept in the north and dogs to the south. Ask the most senior Brahmanas of your land not to cohabit with their wives during the duration of the yagna. They must assist us in every manner, gathering the herbs and minerals and animals as we tell them. We will need pots and pans made of clay. Spoons and ladles made of metal and wood. They must speak only when spoken to and must never hear the incantations. The power of the ritual must be confined and controlled. It can harm those who interfere or trespass.’

The Siddhas also stated clearly that at any one time, one queen had to be present on the northern platform bathed by elephants, ready to receive the magic potion whenever it was ready. ‘In Drupada’s yagna, the queen was busy performing ablutions just when the potion came to life. We could not wait. We poured the potion into the pit. The potion became the seed, the embers the field. Thus emerged Drupada’s son and daughter from the fire-pit, fully grown.’

Yuvanashva instructed his wives accordingly. ‘I want babies, not full grown men or women as children. You must therefore sit in the elephant stables in rotation so that at any given time there is at least one of you to receive the potion.’

‘We will do whatever makes you happy, Arya. The yagna will surely be a success,’ said Pulomi, sensing her husband’s anxiety.

‘Whether it succeeds or fails, that I need a yagna to father a child is proof that I have failed as a man,’ said Yuvanashva, his shoulders drooping.

‘No, you have not failed,’ said Simantini.

‘Then where are the children Bharya?’ asked Yuvanashva wryly, looking around.

‘As a man, I mean,’ said Simantini. ‘There is more to being a man than fathering children. You have been a good husband to your wives and a good son to your mother.’

‘Tell that to the ancestors.’

A crow flew past. Keshini picked up a betel nut and threw it at the bird. Pulomi laughed, then asked, ‘Why should only one of us sit in the elephant stable at a time? Why not all of us together? Will the yagna make a mother of only one of us?’.

Yuvanashva was silent for some time. ‘I never thought of that.’

Keshini said, ‘Let us all be mothers, Arya.’

‘Unless, you feel the potion will not be strong enough to give three children,’ said Pulomi.

‘If it is a weak potion, we will end up bearing parts of a single child,’ warned Simantini. ‘This is what happened in Bhismaka’s yagna. He gave the potion to his two wives, because he did not want to play favourites. And each wife ended up bearing one half of the child.’

Keshini grimaced in disgust.

‘But during Ajaputra’s yagna, the potion gave four sons to three queens. Surely Yaja and Upayaja are as good as Eksinga-muni,’ said Pulomi provocatively.

‘Of course we are as good as Eksinga-muni, even better. We can even make a man pregnant,’ said Yaja, his pride clearly wounded. ‘Yes, all three can sit in the elephant stable. But tell them they must be quiet. Especially the youngest one. We hear her chatter can scare the gods away.’

‘In fact,’ said Upayaja, ‘The queens can contribute to the ceremony. At noon each day, when the yagna pauses, let them go to the temple of Ileshwara and distribute cows to childless Brahmana couples. This will earn them merit and make the potion stronger. Through ritual, we will invoke the sky-gods. With charity, let them please the earth-goddesses. Rasa will move from sky to earth and earth to sky and give you the sons you want.’

Sons. Yuvanashva could not believe his ears. He hurried to the palace with the good news.

THE CEREMONY



And so the yagna began. Yuvanashva stood outside the enclosure, watching the Kshatriyas pace up and down, keeping an eye on the skies above. Brahmanas ran in and out with various herbs, animals, minerals, pots, pans, spoons and

ladles. Yaja and Upayaja were very demanding. The Brahmanas sometimes looked irritated. Sometimes exasperated. Often exhausted. ‘We have never seen such a ritual. For days they are silent. Then they chant. Strange sounds. Then they sing. Beautiful soulful melodies. They glare if we stop to watch. And throw things at us if we show any interest. We have not seen them sleep or eat or rest. They are always doing something. Lighting lamps. Stoking the flames. Making offerings. Chanting. Singing. Praying. Making gestures. Pacing restlessly. Staring at the sky. Making patterns on the soil with rice flour.’

The queens witnessed it all from the elephant stable, too spellbound by the ceremonies to try and understand it. The smell of elephant dung, rotting flowers and burning ghee made them giddy.

Dressed in red, hair unbound, clothes wet, Simantini shivered. She distracted herself by ensuring Pulomi and Keshini were comfortable. She offered her lap for them to sleep on and rubbed their feet if it grew too cold. The horses paced restlessly but the cows stood still.

Sometimes, usually around dusk, the elephants would grunt and the dogs would bark. Perhaps they saw what human eyes cannot or heard what human ears did not: the prowling of Yakshas, the music of the Gandharvas, and the dance of the Apsaras.

Keshini saw the fire rise and fall in the altar, taking shapes of various gods riding on different mounts: the sun-god on his horse, the moon-god on his gander, the rain-god on his elephant, the wind-god on his antelope, and finally, the two-headed fire-god on his ram. Early in the morning, the mists would descend and the queens would see Asuras struggling to rise from beneath the earth. The Devas would leap out of the fire-altar, raise their swords and behead their subterranean enemies, who could resurrect themselves using the magic of Shukra between dusk and dawn. All in silence. This was the great battle fought incessantly between earth and sky, recreated by the Siddhas through their yagna. This was the battle that churns rasa and creates life. Keshini was scared. She wanted to share her thoughts but bit her tongue to stop herself from speaking. She had been warned. Her chattering frightened away the gods.

At night, the golden glow of the fire spread itself like a parasol over the city. From her window, Shilavati could hear the wood cracking, the sound of nervous beasts, the cry of unknown spirits. She looked at the silent crows still in the trees

outside. The tiger-skin rug in her audience chamber would come alive briefly. The turtle painted with rice flour on the floor would withdraw into its shell. She would hear the footsteps of Yama's buffalo and the twang of Kama's bow. Her heart would beat faster. Fear would grip her. Fear for her son. Had she driven him to this? Perhaps it would have been better if she had forbidden it.

Meanwhile, in Kuru-kshetra, Arjuna raised his conch-shell trumpet to his lips and declared war. Focus on action, Krishna had told him, leave the rest to God.

MERITS OF COW-GIVING



All day and all night the three queens stayed in the elephant stable, suffering the sights and smells, leaving only one at a time, to perform their ablutions and to purify themselves. Yaja and Upayaja silently appreciated their commitment. They felt the queens' love for their husband.

At noon, the chanting stopped, the offerings stopped, the fire went low and the Siddhas shut their eyes. Everyone napped. Even the Devas and the Apsaras. Yuvanashva went to Shilavati's courtyard for his morning meal, and the queens went to the temple of Ileshwara to distribute cows to childless Brahmana couples.

Cows were greatly coveted in Ila-vrita. Gifting a cow earned great merit. To kill one was the worst of crimes. A cow gave milk and dung, food and fuel; she helped make a home. To gift a cow to a newly married Brahmana couple earned greatest of merits for with sustenance assured, the Brahmana assisted by his wife focused on the rites and rituals that made the gods happy. And when the gods were happy all was well with the world.

The bards had spread news of the cow-giving ceremony of Yuvanashva as rapidly as the news of the war to be fought between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Soon the highways were full of Kshatriyas going to Kuru-kshetra with their weapons and Brahmanas going to Vallabhi with their wives. Inspired, the bards sang, 'Over there Yama will give blood to Kali. Over here Kama will receive milk from Gauri. In between, in perfect harmony, will sit Prajapati, the source and destination of rasa.'

Brahmana couples came from across Ila-vrita in hordes, accompanied by mothers and fathers and village elders, on foot, and on barges, on bullock carts provided by Vaishya elders, and on chariots of Kshatriyas on their way to Kuru-

kshetra. Some of the boys and girls were still children, the cow in many cases the only reason for their marriage.

The men wore dhotis and uttaryas made of white fabric lined with gold. All had the sacred thread running across their chest hanging over their left shoulder, mark of their lineage that granted them the right to read the Veda and connect with God. Holding their parasols to shade themselves and their wives from the sun, they looked earnest and distinguished. As they walked past the city gate and took the road leading to the city square between the temple and the palace, the Vaishya women of Vallabhi, resting in the verandas outside their houses, admired their brown bodies, firm thighs, broad shoulders, long tapering arms covered with talismans and thin, really thin, waists. All newly married for sure, for none had the paunch that comes after husbands are fed by loving wives.

The women wore saris dyed in different shades of red. This was the colour of new brides; after they became mothers they would wear saris dyed in different shades of green. One end of their sari was draped as a dhoti: tied around the hips, drawn between the legs and tucked in the back. The other end was used to cover the upper half of the body. Women who came from the east draped it across the breasts over the left shoulder while women who came from the west draped it across the back over the right shoulder. As the women moved one could get tantalizing glimpses of their breasts, sometimes painted with tattoos. Husbands tried hard not to let their gaze wander beyond their wives but it was difficult. So many young brides, dressed in fine fabrics, bejewelled like star goddesses, like an army of red Apsaras emerging in waves from the three great rivers of Ilavrita.

Over the sari, many women wore uttaryas to cover their heads and faces. 'There will be many strange men of different varnas in and around the temple,' warned their mothers, 'You must not see them and they must not see you.' All the women wore sixteen types of jewellery that indicated that they were married. Red kumkum lined the parting of their hair informing lustful sky-gods they were no longer virgins.

The women clutched the bundle of clothes they had carried along with them. Most had spent the night in the quarters provided by the royal family just outside the city gates next to a vast water tank. They had woken up early, bathed and bedecked themselves in anticipation of the ceremony. Each day, it was said the

three queens gifted over two hundred cows to two hundred newly wed childless Brahmana couples. And the ceremony had gone on for over twenty-one days. 'Four thousand two hundred cows at least,' said a young Acharya, well versed in mathematics. 'Now we know why it is said that Lakshmi resides in Vallabhi. This is surely the richest kingdom in Arya-varta.'

On entering the city, the Brahmana couples first made their way to the temple of Ileshwara to pay obeisance to the lord of Vallabhi. Special ushers had been appointed to welcome the Brahmana couples. As per the rules, couples could enter the temple any day and any night except on full moon days when only men were allowed and on new moon nights when only women were allowed. After the newly wed couples had gazed into the kind eyes of the god who is also a goddess, the priests garlanded the grooms with white dhatura flowers and the brides with red jabakusuma flowers taken down from the sacred image itself.

The couples were then directed to a vast thatched pavilion erected on the western side of the shrine. The crowds made many women nervous. Their husbands put a reassuring arm around their shoulders.

On one side of the thatched pavilion were the cows, all bathed, with tassels tied to their short horns and chains of tiny copper bells around their neck.

As they waited for the queens to arrive, some Brahmana boys began singing hymns from the Veda. 'Let us always move from non-existence towards existence, from darkness towards light, from death towards immortality.' Others sang, 'Before there was creation, there had to be desire. For unless you want something, nothing can come to be.'

The herald finally announced, 'The queens have arrived. They will wash your feet, then serve you food, then gift you a cow and seek your blessings. We request all Aryas with their Bharyas to please be patient and not to gather around the queens. No one must touch them. They are participants of a yagna and cannot be contaminated.'

An old Brahmana went around talking to the husbands. Where did they come from? Which Brahmana clan did they belong to? Were they Pujaris or Ritwiks or Acharyas?

The women chatted amongst themselves. It was rare for them to meet women outside their neighbourhood and rarer still to meet women from other lands.

There was excitement all around and anxiety. Few had ever left their villages before in their life. And this would perhaps be the only time they did.

‘I am from Madra,’ said a particularly talkative Brahmana. ‘I came here on the king’s chariot. He is the uncle of Nakula and Sahadeva, youngest sons of Pandu, born of his second wife, Madri. Naturally we thought he would fight for the Pandavas, but he seems to have switched sides. Now he fights for the Kauravas who with their eleven armies, as against seven of the Pandava, are assured of victory. These are truly bad times when kings fight to win rather than to set things right. Mercifully, there are kingdoms like Vallabhi where rules are still strictly followed and even consecrated kings are not allowed to rule till they father sons. So where are you from?’

The Brahmana standing to his right, having tried hard to ignore him, finally replied, ‘I am from Pratishtana.’

‘From across the mountains? How did you reach here so fast?’

Before he could answer, the queens entered the pavilion. All conversations stopped and everyone crowded around them. They were laden in gold and were surrounded by maids who held in their hands parasols and yak-tail fly whisks, representing the king in his absence.

‘How do they walk?’ wondered the talkative Brahmana from Madra. ‘Even their servants have more ornaments than all the brides here.’

‘That is why they are called queens,’ replied the bride of the Brahmana from Pratishtana. Her head and face were covered with a long yellow uttarya.

‘Quiet,’ hissed the Brahmana from Pratishtana. ‘Women should not talk to men other than husbands.’

‘Laying down the rules, already,’ the wife retorted. The men around smiled. The Brahmana from Pratishtana lowered his head in embarrassment.

‘Stop talking, Bharya,’ pleaded the Brahmana from Pratishtana, ‘People are looking. And you are making me nervous. Did you not see the eyes of the goddess in the shrine? They were red and angry. She knows.’

BRIDE WITHOUT A TOE-RING



The ceremony began with the blowing of conch shells and ululation by the royal maids. This was done to ward away the demons. The couples stood in a straight line. ‘One hundred and eighty seven couples,’ informed the old priest

who maintained the accounts for the queens.

Directed by a Pujari, Keshini washed the feet of the assembled men and women. Her maids passed her gold pots containing turmeric water that she poured over their feet. She then wiped them clean with a white cotton cloth and smeared sandal paste around their anklets. 'In the body of each Brahmana man reside all the gods of the sky; in the body of their wives reside all the goddesses of earth,' said the Pujari who then identified the Brahmana couples one by one. 'This couple is from Pratishtana,' he said, pointing to the man with the outspoken wife in a yellow uttarya. Keshini noticed his young bride had hairy legs and no toe-rings. She looked up quizzically. Something was amiss. She sensed it. Brushing aside unholy thoughts she moved on to the next couple.

Plantain leaves were spread. Everyone would eat rice cooked in milk and jaggery served by the second queen. When Pulomi started serving the food, the priests chanted, 'From food, from food, all creatures came to be. By food they live, in food they move, into food they pass. Food, the chief of things, of all things that come to be. What eats is eaten and what is eaten eats in turn.' As she was serving, she noticed that the bride without a toe-ring, pointed out to her by Keshini, had started eating even before the groom. Something just did not feel right.

After the rice was eaten, tambulas were distributed. Satiated, all the Brahmanas burped in satisfaction and smiled. It was time to receive the cows and grant blessings. Simantini, as chief queen, performed the final ritual. She handed over the cows to the young couples one by one. She spoke to them for a bit, asked their names, and then touched her head to their feet. Behind her the other two queens also bowed their heads reverentially. The young couples, in awe of the royal splendour and humility, raised their hand in blessing, 'May the brides of the Turuvasu clan be the mothers of a hundred sons.'

Simantini came to the bride draped in the yellow uttarya who she had been informed had hairy legs, no toe-rings and who ate even before her husband. After handing over the cow, Simantini turned to her husband and asked, 'What is your name? Where do you come from?'

'I am Sumedha, a Pujari from Pratishtana,' he said. Simantini noticed he was tall with fine wavy hair falling on his shoulders. His shoulders were broad and he was thin, with sunken cheeks and full lips.

‘And hers?’

‘Somvati,’ he said.

Simantini raised the yellow uttarya. The bride quivered. ‘There is no need to be shy. I am like your mother. Won’t you show me your face?’ said Simantini affectionately. The bride did not raise her head. Simantini touched her chin and made her look up. Her eyes were firmly shut. ‘Don’t be scared. I will not hurt you,’ reassured Simantini who felt sorry for the girl. She wore no toe-rings. She must be really poor. No nose-ring either. Most inappropriate. ‘A new bride without a nose-ring,’ Simantini admonished the husband with a look. ‘Here, take mine,’ she said with a motherly smile. Everyone was touched by this gesture of royal generosity as Simantini removed her own nose-ring and offered it to the husband. He did not know how to react. ‘Go on, take it,’ said the queen encouragingly. He took it nervously, uncomfortable because of the attention they were drawing. ‘Put it on,’ the queen said softly. This was an order. He could not refuse.

‘Now?’ he asked, his heart beating rapidly.

‘If not now, then when?’ asked the queen’s handmaiden. Everyone laughed. Sumedha gulped. His hand shivered. ‘He is shy,’ said the handmaiden. ‘Here, let me help you.’ She took the nose-ring from him and proceeded to put it on his bride. Somvati pulled back. ‘It won’t hurt. Have you not put a nose-ring before?’ The bride’s hesitation drew even more attention. The women crowded around the couple. ‘No wonder he was hesitating. He cannot find her hole,’ said the handmaiden. The men gasped at what was being suggested. The women giggled. Even the queens.

A particularly buxom Brahmana bride offered to help the handmaiden. Soon nearly half a dozen women were all over Sumedha’s bride. All bedecked in bridal finery. Red and gold. The fragrance of mallika and champaka and jabakusuma. Sandal paste. Soft touch. Intoxicating eyes.

The woman closest to Somvati felt something stirring against her hip. Something hard. She screamed.

DISRUPTION OF THE CEREMONY



That night, Yuvanashva’s wives rolled on the ground and wept. ‘They have ruined everything. Now we will never be mothers.’

‘What happened?’ asked Yuvanashva.

With her head to the floor, the handmaiden explained, ‘The queens gave cows to two men masquerading as a Brahmana couple. One of them, dressed as woman, pretended to be the bride. They were treated as husband and wife, their feet were washed, they were fed with other Brahmanas and even given a cow.’

‘How can a man be a bride?’ moaned Simantini, ‘By acknowledging them as a couple we have surely angered the gods. They will curse us, shower us with demerit. The yagna is doomed.’

‘Kill them, Arya. Kill those imposters,’ said Pulomi.

Keshini said nothing. The boy who masqueraded as the wife looked familiar. She had seen them somewhere. Tarini-pur? But they said they were from Pratishtana. Were they lying? Wasn’t the one pretending to be the wife the Brahmana orphan who everyone called ‘donkey’ in the village pond?

Yuvanashva looked at his agitated wives. He felt their despair. With a grim look, he sent for the Danda-Nayak, captain of his guards.

A TERRIFIED BOY



The sun was setting in Kuru-kshetra, the eighteenth time since the war began. In all probability it was the last.

In the dungeons of Vallabhi, a terrified young man named Somvat, dressed in a red sari and yellow uttarya, hoped the last few hours had been a nightmare.

After the woman had screamed in the temple, everyone had stepped back. His body’s reaction was evident for all to see. The queens had turned away in disgust. ‘Get them away,’ Simantini had ordered. The other queens followed her out of the enclosure. Terrified brides ran towards their husbands.

The temple attendants grabbed hold of his sari and pulled it away. He stood there naked, like a freak, with women’s ornaments on his hands, legs and neck, flowers in his hair, a yellow uttarya in his hand, and throbbing manhood jutting out of from the side of his tight loincloth that had failed in its purpose.

His friend, Sumedha, the ‘husband’, tried to cover his friend’s shame with his upper garment. He was held back and punched so hard in the stomach that he could not breathe. Somvat crouched on the floor and covered his face. Everybody stood back and stared.

Then came the pronouncements. Slowly at first, like the buzz of bees. Then it poured like torrential rains. ‘Flog the imposters.’ ‘Kill the defilers.’ ‘Burn them.’ ‘Behead them.’ ‘Blacken their face and take them across the city naked on a donkey.’ ‘Castrate them. Sell them to the Chandalas.’ Somvat was scared, embarrassed; he wanted the earth to split open and the Matrikas to swallow him whole.

The chief priest intervened. ‘It is not for us to decide this man’s fate.’ With a concerned look, he gave back the sari to Somvat. ‘Cover yourself,’ he said looking away. He then led the two boys out of the precinct. They had to be handed over to the Danda-Nayak who would then take them to the king. The Raja would decide their fate. Only the king had the right to do so.

Word of the two boys who duped the three queens dressed as husband and wife spread like wildfire. Men and women ran towards the temple street. It was soon bursting with curious onlookers. They made it difficult for the guards to take the boys through. When the people caught sight of the boy wearing women’s clothes, they started hurling abuses and pelting stones.

One young man slipped in between the guards and gave Somvat’s testicles a vicious squeeze. Somvat yelped in agony. ‘That does not sound like a woman, does it?’ said the man.

The crowd erupted in a chant, ‘Kill the man who marries the man. Kill the man who pretends to be a wife. Kill the defiling demons.’

Only when he was cast into the dungeon, did Somvat realize the enormity of his actions. Fear crept into his heart. He wished this had never happened, that he and Sumedha were back home. Tears rolled down his eyes. ‘If only I was really a woman,’ he thought. ‘Then Sumedha and I would become a real Brahmana couple. No one would accuse us of duping the queens or disrupting the king’s yagna. We could go home alive.’

No sooner did he think this thought than a strange being appeared before him. Pot-bellied, with short stumpy legs, buttocks as large as pumpkins, breasts as small as onions. ‘That sounds like a really good idea,’ it said.

Somvat jumped up. ‘Who are you? How did you get in here?’ he asked.

‘I am Sthunakarna. A Yaksha. Maker of riddles. Guardian of treasures. Follower of Kubera. Resident of Alaka-puri. I can go wherever I please—

through walls, into dreams. Rules of Manavas do not apply to me. It was I who made Shikhandi a man and a husband. I can make you a woman and a wife.'

STHUNAKARNA, THE YAKSHA



Somvat had seen a creature such as Sthunakarna only on the walls of Ileshwara's temple. Images of such deformed beasts lined the northern wall just below images of the Apsaras. 'Because the world belongs not just to beautiful creatures,' said the Pujari. 'Shiva loves them. He is the indifferent one, who looks beyond bodies, beautiful and ugly, male and female, young and old, at the suffering soul.'

'Do you see this?' said the Yaksha pointing to the hairy slit between his legs. Somvat turned his head away in disgust. The Yaksha caught him by the hair and shoved his head towards his groin. 'Look at it. Don't be shy. It is what you must have if you want to wear a sari. Not this,' he said grabbing Somvat's penis with his other hand. Somvat screamed but no sound left his lips. 'No one can see me. No one can hear you,' said the Yaksha grinning. His teeth were deformed but sharp. Somvat was terrified. Would this goblin eat him whole? Or just parts of him?

The Yaksha let go of his hair and caressed him gently. 'Don't be scared. I don't want to harm you. I am here to help you. I once had what you had. Gave it to Shikhandi, you see,' he roared. 'It was a full moon night. I saw him wading into the river Kalindi intent on drowning himself. I dragged him out and asked, "Why are you trying to kill yourself?" "To save my city," he cried. "My father-in-law has sent his warriors on elephants armed with fire-arrows to set Panchala aflame unless I prove I am a man." "And how are you supposed to prove you are a man?" I asked. He replied, "By making love to the buxom courtesan sent to my father's house by my father-in-law." "Why can you not just make love to your wife instead? That's how husbands usually prove they are men," I said. "That's where all the problem started," he said. Then he started crying like a little girl.'

Though frightened, Somvat was fascinated by the way the Yaksha kept changing voices, sounding sometimes like himself and sometimes like, in all likelihood, Shikhandi.

The Yaksha continued, 'On his wedding night, Shikhandi's wife noticed that her husband's body was no different from hers.' The Yaksha laughed, 'Listen to

this: Drupada had convinced young Shikhandi that his manhood would emerge on his wedding night in the presence of his wife. Can you believe such a thing? Shikhandi managed to convince his bride of this too. Innocent little thing! So the two spent all night waiting for the manhood to emerge and as you can guess,' the Yaksha paused for effect, 'nothing emerged. Both went to their respective fathers. Shikhandi's father said the wife was useless; they should look for another one. The bride's father, the king of Dasharni, sent a courtesan to Drupada with a warning that if Shikhandi failed to prove his manliness to her satisfaction, the Kshatriyas of Dasharni would release their fire-arrows and burn Panchala to the ground.'

As the Yaksha spoke, Somvat forgot all about the situation he was in. The fetters. The dungeons. The fear of losing his head. He was completely enchanted by the story. 'What happened then?'

'Shikhandi ran out of Panchala, suddenly confronted by the truth of his body. He tried to drown himself in the river. I saved him. Or should I say her? I asked him, "What do you think you are, a man or woman?" "I am not sure," he said in a voice that was definitely not a man's. "My father insists I am a man. So does my mother. But my body is just like my wife's," so saying he untied his dhoti and lowered his uttarya. I tell you, it was the most perfect woman's body I had seen in a long time, marred by rough muscular arms. Lotus-bud breasts. Smooth round hips. I know human women. I have been with lots of them. Manava women invoke Yaksha men using magical formulae because we provide them with the greatest satisfaction; Yaskshas are hung like donkeys, you see, thick and black and long. Just like you.'

Suddenly aware of the Yaksha's grip on his manhood, Somvat tried to pull away. The Yaksha's grip tightened. 'Where do you wish to go? Where can you go?' said the Yaksha glancing at the chains round the boy's ankles and wrists. 'Now let me finish this story. I felt sorry for Shikhandi. I picked her up and put her on my lap and wiped her tears and comforted her. She was a girl. A little girl raised as a boy. Confused. Embarrassed by the princess of Dasharni. Afraid of being the cause of Panchala's destruction.' The Yaksha paused. Somvat noticed that the Yaksha had compassionate eyes. 'I felt sorry for him. I told him that I would grant him my masculinity and take on his femininity. Then he could be a man with the courtesan sent by his father-in-law. After that he could be a man

with his wife. And then with as many women as he wished. But only until the following new-moon night. On that day he would have to return my manhood to me. I told him a fortnight was enough for him to teach a lesson to all those women who want him to be a man,' Sthunakarna chuckled.

'What do you mean teach the women a lesson?' asked Somvat.

With a conspiratorial look, the Yaksha said, 'It's a Yaksha's secret that few humans know. Women who know it never share it with others out of shame and spite. A Yaksha man can go to a Manava woman only if she calls him, you see. But he can go to her only once, never again. If a woman seeks a Yaksha in lust, she is left with a terrible insatiable itch that no one can cure. If a woman seeks a Yaksha in love, there is no itch; instead she ends up bearing a child even if she is an old hag.'

'Is that true?'

'As I told you, the laws of nature that apply to Manavas do not apply to Yakshas. If Shikhandi's wife came to him in love she would become the mother of his child. If she came to him in lust she would suffer a terrible itch forever. A deserving punishment I must say,' Sthunakarna bared his teeth in glee.

'How many women have you given the itch and to how many have you given a child?' asked Somvat.

'Ten itches but no children. Look at me, who will fall in love with a Yaksha. They want us only for one thing.' Sthunakarna's thoughts went back to the women who had compelled him to come to them with the magical formula: a farmer's frustrated widow, a fisherman's demanding wife, a queen of an impotent king, a merchant's impatient daughter, an old doctor's young wife...a long list, extending back to the days of Ila. Three hundred and forty years earlier. That's how old he was.

The itch that followed intercourse with a Yaksha was Kubera's way of getting back at Manava women who used Yakshas for pleasure and then discarded them without a thought. It was said the king of Yakshas still nursed a broken heart. From the shadows he would watch all the women who had ever summoned Yakshas thrash about in bed trying in vain to get satisfaction from other men, or from other substitutes: fingers, vegetables, false manhoods fashioned out of wood and clay, even animals. 'Who told them to call a Yaksha?' Kubera would

say gleefully. Sthunakarna found his king's delight pathetic and perverse. But he never said a word. Kubera did not like being judged.

Sthunakarna turned his attention back to Somvat. Somvat was looking at his groin, 'So where is it? Your manhood that Shikhandi was to return in fifteen days?'

Sthunakarna started to bawl. 'What was supposed to come back in a fortnight has not come back even after thirty years and may never come back!' He started hitting his head against the wall. Then suddenly he stopped, sat up, turned to Somvat, skewed his eyes and said, 'Unless you help.'

'Me?' Somvat's fear returned.

'Yes. Shikhandi left with my manhood clinging to his body and I waited for the new moon night for him to return. The moon waned, then waxed, then waned again. He did not come. So I went to Panchala. Ordered him to return what was rightfully mine. Threatened him with dire consequences if he refused. "My wife refuses to come to me," he said, "and said what she saw on the wedding night is her only truth. That I will always be a woman to her. Husband but not man. Let me be a man till the night she calls me to her bed. I beg you." Fool that I am, I agreed. I thought his wife would change her mind in a few days. But she refused to do so. The stubborn bitch. Days turned into weeks, weeks to months, months to years. Thirty years. Draupadi was born, the Kuru lands divided, Indra-prastha rose and was gambled away. The Pandavas went into exile and returned. I waited and waited for Shikhandi's wife to call her husband to bed. Meanwhile, my body transformed. I grew breasts. A slit formed between my legs. I grew a womb. I was just getting used to being a woman when the Pandavas invited Shikhandi to fight alongside them in Kuru-kshetra. Just before he rode into battle, his wife finally let him do what he should have done on their wedding night. I expected my manhood to return that very moment. But it did not.' The Yaksha put his tiny hands on his large head and pouted like a little girl.

Despite the feeling of dread building up in his heart, Somvat could not help smiling. The whole story was so bizarre. He felt sorry for the Yaksha whose compassion had cost him his manhood. 'Why was that?'

'A mystery,' said the Yaksha, jumping up. 'I went to Alaka-puri and questioned my king, Kubera. He kicked me on the head and said, "Serves you right for showing compassion to a human. You know how they are." Then he

laughed and all the Yakshas laughed with him. “Now that you are a woman you should stay a woman. We can all have fun with you,” he suggested. I kept quiet. Did I tell you Kubera has a very nasty sense of humour? And he hates humans, uses them as beasts of burden. Rides on their backs as Shiva rides on a bull. After much harassment he told me why the manhood clung to Shikhandi’s body. “His wife sought him in love. Her withered womb has bloomed with a child. The manhood therefore clings to the father and will go nowhere. Such is the law of Prajapati.”

Sthunakarna had asked Kubera ‘What is to become of me? How will I become whole again?’

Kubera had replied, ‘Find a man who wants to become a woman. Take his penis and give him womanhood in return.’

‘Do such men exist?’

‘You have just lost your manhood to a woman who wanted to become a man. Then there must be a man out there willing to give up his manhood to become a woman,’ Kubera had said.

‘And that is why I come before you,’ said the Yaksha to the boy dressed as a woman, incarcerated in the dungeons of Vallabhi for duping the three wives of Yuvanashva. ‘Accept my womanhood. Give me your manhood. And there is a chance that they will set you and your friend free.’

‘That was just a passing thought. I don’t want to be a woman. I am happy as I am,’ said Somvat.

‘But you want to stay alive, don’t you? As a man who duped three queens there is little chance of that.’

Somvat imagined himself being dragged outside the city, near the cremation ground, being shoved against the chopping block. The smell of blood of previous offenders permeating through the rotting wood. The swoosh of the axe. The crack of the spine. Blood pouring out of his tongue. Dead eyes wide open. ‘I don’t know what is worse: dying as a man or living as a woman?’ His feet were cold, his palms sweaty.

‘Life is any day better than death,’ said Sthunakarna, ‘The body does not matter.’

‘It matters whether you are man or woman,’ said Somvat. ‘A woman is not free; she has to obey her father, husband and son.’

‘What have we here? An intellectual!’ Sthunakarna said sarcastically. ‘No one is free in this world. Even men are fettered to their lineage. They must be their father’s son. Look at you. Can you escape marriage? Are you free to enter the shrine of the goddess on your own? Do you really want to be a Pujari? Your life has been laid out before you and you cannot escape it.’

The Yaksha let go of Somvat’s feet. Somvat brought them together. The chain clanked. ‘Women bleed. They become inauspicious every month. Have to be kept away. I don’t want that.’ He felt the wetness of sweat between his thighs. Was this how the wetness of menstrual blood would be?

‘If you bleed, you will have the power to create life in your body. Feel the kick of a child from within. Feel milk ooze out of your nipples. No man knows that pleasure. It is the greatest pleasure in the world,’ said the Yaksha.

‘There is no pleasure in childbirth. I have heard women scream.’

‘That is more than made up for while making a child. Kama is kinder to women than to men, you see. Women get more pleasure during sex than men.’

‘How do you know?’

The Yaksha smiled. ‘I have been a woman for thirty years.’ He put his little stubby fingers into his ears and moaned ecstatically. Somvat turned away in disgust. ‘You have been with a woman. I can smell her on you. After you spilt your seed you were ready to move away weren’t you? But she was just getting started. A woman can take more lovers in a night than a man ever can. This frightens Manava men so they bind their women with marriage.’

Somvat’s mind wandered to his seventh night with the wife of Trigarta, the horse-herder, who unable to father a child himself, having gone to numerous astrologers and doctors and socerers, had finally invited Somvat to perform niyoga on his wife. After he had spilt his seed, he felt the horse-herder’s wife squeeze his hand, as if telling him not to stop or pull away. He did not understand it then. Now he did.

Somvat imagined Sumedha as his lover, between his legs. The grip of thighs round his waist. Muffled moans of the horse-herder’s wife. Her fingers scratching the floor resisting the urge to hold him, afraid of the husband who was watching it all. Strange thoughts entered his mind. New thoughts. Unthinkable thoughts. ‘No, no,’ he said, his body suddenly warm. ‘I will have to do what

Sumedha tells me. Follow him like a maid. Cook him food. Clean his house. Answer to his every whim. No, no, I don't want to be a woman.'

Sthunakarna sensed the waves of warmth in Somvat's body. He had started thinking about becoming a woman. 'Yes, yes, you must,' the Yaksha persisted, 'You are only sixteen. Don't be so attached to your body that you end up losing your life. Bodies come and go. Like old clothes to be worn at birth and discarded at death, you see. Do not value it so much. Say yes. Say yes. You have known what it is to be a man. You have been with a woman and created life outside your body. Now, you have the opportunity to be a woman, be with a man, create life inside your body. You will live a full life.'

'No, I don't want to bear children. I don't want to give my manhood up. There is no guarantee that the king will spare me,' said Somvat, a wave of panic engulfing him suddenly.

'Give it to me. Give it to me. Give it to me,' yelled the Yaksha, jumping up. He began to cry and slap himself. 'Can't you see? It will save your life. You will have a man who will take care of you. And you don't have to pretend to be powerful. You can shed all the tears you want.'

'I will never be able to show my chest to the sun. Covered always, bared only for Sumedha and the children I will bear him.' The words tumbled out without thought. Children he would bear Sumedha. Images flashed before his eyes. A small house. A kitchen fire. Rice boiling. Sumedha sitting on a mat playing with their child, singing a song, a love song. He cutting vegetables grown in the kitchen garden feeling a kick in his womb. He smiled. It felt good. A sense of tranquil familiarity. Stability. Order. Marriage to the two daughters of Kaveri would have drawn them apart. They knew it. Still they had submitted to it with little thought. But here was an option. Should he grab it? 'Yes,' Somvat said suddenly.

'Yes, what?' croaked the Yaksha.

'Yes. Make me a woman. Give me a chance of life. A better life, maybe.'

In an instant his manhood was gone. Sthunakarna was gone. In the dungeon, chained to the wall, was now a woman called Somvati.

That's when the dream ended and a new reality opened up.

TRANSFORMATION



The sun rose. A man ran into the city shouting, 'It is over. The war is over. All the Kauravas are dead and the victorious Pandavas will soon enter Hastinapuri triumphant on five bejewelled elephants.'

But no one in Vallabhi was interested in what this man had to say. Everyone had heard something unbelievable that had taken place in the dungeons. And they were more interested in knowing the truth of this matter.

The Danda-Nayak stood in the corridor between the queen's audience chamber and the Turuvasu mahasabha. On one side was Shilavati. On the other side was the king and his three wives. 'What is it?' he asked.

Not knowing whom to address, the Danda-Nayak bowed his head and said, 'Something strange has happened. I cannot explain it.'

'What is it?' asked Shilavati, 'Has something happened to the boys?'

'Yes and no,' he said, sounding clearly disturbed.

'Speak up,' said Yuvanashva.

'Patience, my king,' said Shilavati.

Yuvanashva glared at his mother. He was tired of being ordered around. The Danda-Nayak sensed the tension. He spoke up without raising his head. 'When we fettered the boys last night, we were sure they were boys. But today morning, one of them, the one dressed in the sari, the one who was pretending to be a woman, turns out to be a real woman.'

Pulomi and Keshini gasped. 'What!' exclaimed Simantini.

'He has become a woman,' the Danda-Nayak repeated softly, realizing how ridiculous his words sounded.

'Have you been drinking?' asked the queen.

'No, Devi. Yesterday I saw the boy. We all saw the boy. He was trying to drape his red sari like a dhoti. We saw his hairy chest. We did not let him. We told him to remain dressed as a woman. That is how we wanted to present him in court. We said he should not be shy of showing the world the masquerade with which he tried to dupe the queens.'

The Danda-Nayak did not recount the vulgar language used. How his guards used sticks to prod the boy's genitals and his anus, asking him what functioned better. He did not recount how they made him undress and dress as a woman several times through the night, threatening to let the dogs chew his testicles if he did not obey. When he said he was thirsty, the guards refused to give him

water until he urinated in the corner, crouching like a woman. Later, out of pity for the whimpering boy, they had left him alone and turned their attention to the 'husband' and asked him what he did on the wedding night. The scared boy had given no answer. He simply wept.

'Today morning, when the sun rose, we saw the boy, who calls himself Somvati, sitting in the corner looking pale and scared, clutching his sari against his chest. We told him to stand and we noticed the contour of his body had changed. His gait had also changed. He looked towards the floor and refused to raise his head. When one of my men caught hold of his arm, he flinched and screamed in what was undoubtedly a woman's voice, quite different from the voice heard the night before, 'I am a married woman. A chaste woman. Don't touch me or you will die.' We thought he had gone mad. We held him by force. He resisted. His sari got undone. We saw on his chest a pair of perfectly shaped breasts. We withdrew. We did not know what to believe. We believe only what we saw. And we saw a woman, who the previous night was a man.'

A long period of silence followed. Everyone tried to make sense of what they had just heard. Then Pulomi spoke up, 'What does it matter what we saw yesterday. It is a good thing that he is a woman. That means we were not duped. We gave a cow to a Brahmana couple not to two men. We have earned no demerit.'

'Yes, yes. Let us look no further. Let them go quietly and forget about what happened,' said Keshini. She did not want the two boys to die.

Simantini nodded in agreement.

The previous night, the three queens were insisting the boys be killed for disrupting their ritual. Now, they were more than ready to let them go.

Yuvanashva was not sure what decision to take.

Before he could make up his mind, Shilavati addressed the Danda-Nayak, 'You are clearly disturbed by the situation. Find out the truth about these boys. Where have they come from? Who are their parents? Are they really Brahmanas?'

Yes, they are, Keshini wanted to say. They belong to my village. But she kept quiet.

The Danda-Nayak looked at Yuvanashva not sure whether he should proceed. Yuvanashva did not like his mother giving the orders. But this had to be done.

He nodded in agreement and let the Danda-Nayak proceed with the investigations. ‘Ask Matanga to confirm if the man you saw yesterday is now actually a woman.’

THE TRUTH OF THE BOYS



When Matanga came to the dungeons, he recognized Somvat instantly. ‘I know him. I know his uncle. He is a Brahmana from my village. He serves in the temple complex of the goddess Tarini and is due to marry the widow Kaveri’s daughter soon. Why is he dressed as a woman?’ he asked the guards. They said nothing.

‘How did this happen?’ he asked the boy, after examining him.

‘It just did,’ said Somvat.

The Danda-Nayak spoke to Matanga, visited Tarini-pur, pieced the whole story together and informed the king of his findings. ‘They belong to Tarini-pur, not Pratishthana and are sons of poor but decent Brahmana families. Their names are Sumedha and Somvat. Both are orphans. Their parents were killed in the flood that struck Tarini-pur fourteen years ago. Somvat lives with his uncle. Sumedha has no one and is raised by all the Brahmana families collectively, each family taking the responsibility of feeding, clothing and sheltering him one month at a time. The boys study and serve in the temple of Tarini, the village goddess. They are the thickest of friends, inseparable, like twin brothers. As the years passed, they watched all their friends get married and raise families. Without wives by their side, Sumedha and Somvat were not allowed to perform yagnas, and pujas, or serve as Acharyas. Struck by the arrows of desire, frustrated at being excluded from all village ceremonies, finding boys even younger than them getting married, the two boys had started showing signs of desperation. They neglected their duties and spent all day looking at the images of Apsaras painted on the temple ceilings. The chief priest even overheard them saying that a Chandala wife is better than no wife at all. Not wanting the boys to do something foolish in their frustration, he gave himself the task to find them wives. But he found this difficult. No one wanted to give their daughters to men without parents or property. Finally, Kaveri, a widow, agreed to let the two boys marry her two daughters. But she had one condition: that they must secure at least one cow for themselves before marriage thus proving their capability to

provide for their wives. Somvat was lucky. Thanks to his uncle's position in the temple, he was chosen to perform niyoga on the wife of Trigarta, the horse-herder. The union was successful and it earned the boy a cow. But Somvat refused to get married until Sumedha found a cow too. He was adamant that he and his friend who had lost parents on the same night should get wives on the same day. It was this desire to find a cow for Sumedha, I suspect, that made them do what they did at the temple. Somvat's cousin says that he overheard Sumedha say that life was unfair, the widow of Tarini-pur would not give him a wife unless he had a cow while the queens of Vallabhi would not give him a cow unless he had a wife.'

Somvat's uncle was summoned to Vallabhi. 'My nephew is a man,' he said on arrival, pleading for his nephew's life. 'How dare Matanga say he is a woman? Under the influence of the vile Sumedha, he put on a woman's clothes. For that he is guilty. We apologize on his behalf, Rajan. Forgive him. He is a child. He does not share the guile of his friend.'

The horse-herder, Trigarta, came forward and said, 'Yes, yes. He is a man. Who better than me to say it? He planted his seed in my wife's body right before my eyes. What a fine specimen of manhood! Why would he want to wear women's clothes? Momentary madness, I think. Or a youthful prank whose magnitude they did not fathom. Forgive them, Arya.'

The chief priest of Tarini's temple was outraged because the sari Somvat draped around him and the jewels he adorned himself with were stolen from the shrine. 'They have insulted the goddesses. They must be punished. Tarini must be appeased. Else she will spread out her tongue and cause a flood to destroy our village once again.'

ONLY THE KING CAN JUDGE



When he was a boy, Yuvanashva kept hearing the story of Bharata, who knew the answers to the most unanswerable of questions. The Yoginis, handmaidens of Shakti, kept asking him difficult questions. He kept giving replies that satisfied them immensely. Sixty-four answers to sixty-four riddles. Pleased, the Yoginis let him sit on their throne which made him Chakra-varti.

Once, the Yoginis asked Bharata about Lakshmi and Alakshmi. 'Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, and Alakshmi, the goddess of strife, are inseparable. They

always travel together. Like twins. Like sisters. Both approach Vishnu and ask him who is more beautiful. What should Vishnu answer? You know the consequences of offending either sister.'

Bharata replied, 'Vishnu should tell Lakshmi that she is beautiful when she walks towards him. He should tell Alakshmi that she is beautiful when she walks away from him.'

'What a clever answer,' said the Yoginis, 'You have made both sisters happy and ensured fortune walks towards Vishnu and strife walks away from him. You, Bharata, are truly the wisest of kings.'

On hearing this story, Yuvanashva told his mother, 'That was a clever answer. But was it a correct answer? Who is really more beautiful? Lakshmi or Alakshmi?'

Shilavati replied, 'There are no correct answers. There are only appropriate answers. And it all depends on one's point of view. If I was Shiva, it would not matter who walked towards me and who walked away from me. Shiva is a hermit, indifferent to peace, prosperity, strife and poverty. Vishnu, however, is a guardian of society. A householder's god. For him Lakshmi matters. She makes the world bountiful and joyful. Alakshmi, he shuns.'

Yuvanashva was told that a Chakra-varti is the model king. He gives the most appropriate judgments.

The case of Sumedha and Somvat was an opportunity to demonstrate he too could give appropriate judgments. The Yoginis were posing an unanswerable question. 'Is Somvat a woman because he has no manhood today? Or is he a man because he had a manhood yesterday?'

What would be the correct answer? Whose point of view should he consider? A hermit's or a householder's? Masculinity and femininity did not matter to Shiva. But they mattered to Vishnu. Hence it mattered to kings, who were Vishnu's diminutive doubles, upholding dharma in their tiny kingdoms just as Vishnu upheld it in the entire cosmos.

How can manhood and womanhood depend on a point of view? wondered Yuvanashva. Surely, it is a truth independent of a point of view? An unchangeable truth. We don't choose our bodies. Like we do not choose our parents. Both come to us at birth as Yama's decrees.

Shilavati had summoned Vipula, Mandavya and Matanga to her audience chamber to discuss the strange case. Yuvanashva insisted on joining them. ‘What about the yagna?’ asked Shilavati.

‘I can manage both, mother,’ said Yuvanashva firmly.

Yuvanashva was clear he wanted the case to be presented in the maha-sabha, not in his mother’s audience chamber. This was his opportunity to show his prowess as king. He hoped that his mother would let him. Vipula always said that power is taken, never given. Yuvanashva hoped there was a better way. He wanted to convince his mother. Or at least make Mandavya compel her.

Mandavya replied, ‘Long ago, Janaka, a forefather of your mother, organized a gathering of Rishis to find out the nature of truth. They discussed and debated the topic for years. Finally, Yagnavalkya concluded, “There is one truth which depends on the point of view, changes with history and geography. It is contextual, impermanent, incomplete. Then there is the opposite kind of truth, independent of all viewpoints, responding neither to history nor to geography. It is permanent and complete and known only to Prajapati, who sees all with his four heads. You and I are not Prajapati. We have only access to incomplete truths.”’

‘What is dharma then? A universal permanent truth or a contextual, impermanent truth?’ asked Yuvanashva.

While Mandavya pondered over the question, Shilavati was quick to reply, ‘It cannot be anything but a permanent truth. Our body, our lineage and our age are the cornerstones of dharma. They determine our social obligations. They are unalterable. Hence dharma is unalterable.’

Yuvanashva did not agree. She was made regent in response to a crisis with the blessings of the Angirasa. Was that not a bending of dharma?

‘When should a man retire, mother?’ asked Yuvanashva. His tone was soft but confrontative. As if sharpening a sword.

‘When one’s children have children of their own. So that the earth is not exploited and she feeds only two generations at a time,’ answered Shilavati.

‘Bhisma did not retire even after his two nephews had children and grandchildren. His march of time is different from your march of time. He ignores the code of ashrama. Would you say he does not uphold dharma?’ Shilavati did not reply. Yuvanashva continued, ‘What is Krishna’s lineage? He is

born of a Yadu nobleman and raised by a cowherd. In battle, he serves as a charioteer. How should we treat him: as a king or a servant? And Shikhandi, mother? Is he a man or a woman?’

Shilavati defended Bhishma. ‘Bhishma has not retired because his household is in turmoil.’ Then she defended Krishna, ‘He has not fought because he needs to be fair to both Kauravas and Pandavas. He is bound by marriage to both families. His sister is married to Arjuna. His son to Duryodhan’s daughter. So his army fights for the Kauravas while he serves as Arjuna’s charioteer.’ Then she said, ‘Shikhandi is Drupada’s son, born by the grace of Ileshwara.’

‘But mother, he was not born with the body of a man. He acquired his manhood mysteriously after his marriage. You must have heard the story of the bride and the concubine from your spies. Did his dharma change with it? Or did it not?’

Shilavati turned to Matanga, ‘Are you sure Somvat was a boy before and a woman now?’

Matanga said, ‘I have held him as a child, examined him when he had fever. As he grew up, his manhood was the talk of all the village. Asanga tells me that at the village pond all the boys called him “donkey.”’ Vipula chuckled. Shilavati did not respond. She found the comment vulgar. ‘But in the dungeons, I see that his body has changed. He has the breasts of a woman and there is no sign of his manhood. His hips are round. His features soft. I can’t explain this, Devi.’

After a long pause Shilavati said, ‘I guess, sometimes, the body can change, lineage may not be so clear, and age needs to be ignored. Depending on the situation rules, roles and rites do change. But for it to be dharma the underlying principle must be to help the weakest thrive, and to provide an opportunity for everyone to validate their existence.’

Yuvanashva was overjoyed. This had never happened before. He had trounced his mother in an intellectual argument. His understanding of dharma was better than his mother’s. With or without children, surely now I am ready to rule, he thought. ‘Who decides what is dharma and what is not?’ he asked.

‘The king. So it has been since the day Vishnu declared Prithu a Manu,’ said Vipula.

‘A king? Not a regent?’

Mandavya avoided looking at Shilavati. Eyes lowered, he replied. ‘A king. Only a king.’

I AM NOT AFRAID



Sumedha did not know about Somvat’s transformation. He had been put in the other end of the dungeon.

This plan of theirs was not supposed to go so horribly wrong. He had borrowed the white dhoti and uttarya lined with gold from the shrine of the divine warlord, Agneya, son of the goddess Tarini. Somvat had borrowed the red sari and yellow uttarya from Tarini’s shrine. Then both of them had borrowed from each of the seven Matrika shrines, which surrounded the main shrine, one piece of jewellery so that no one noticed their absence, earrings from one Matrika, necklaces from another. They had even stolen toe-rings and a nose-ring.

The toe-rings turned out to be too small and the nose-ring could not be worn because Somvat refused to pierce his nose. They had run out of the village at dusk and had travelled through the night fearlessly, enjoying each others company, stopping finally at dawn under a banyan tree on the banks of the Kalindi, a short distance from Vallabhi, where they changed into ‘husband and wife’. As he draped the sari, Somvat had said, ‘This is fun. Remember, we are supposed to be from Pratishtana?’ Since Pratishtana was so far south of Vallabhi, beyond the Vindhya mountains, Somvat had surmised there was less likelihood of them crossing paths of any Brahmanas from that city in Vallabhi. The Brahmana couples from Tarini-pur had already come and gone with the cows on the first day of the cow-giving ceremony itself. There was little chance of bumping into any one of them either.

Sumedha remembered how he suddenly became nervous, ‘It is not appropriate that a man wear a woman’s clothes.’

‘It is appropriate if done for a good cause,’ Somvat had said confidently, as he tried to figure out if the long end of the sari should be draped from front over the left shoulder in the manner of women from the east or from the back over the right shoulder in the manner of women from the west.

‘What do you mean a good cause?’ he had asked.

Somvat had replied, ‘You heard what happened in Matsya during the thirteenth year of the Pandavas’ exile. They all lived incognito as servants in the

king's palace. Draupadi served as a palace maid. The king's lout of a brother-in-law, Kichaka, forced himself into her chambers. But the woman in bed turned out to be her second husband, Bhima, the mightiest Pandava.'

'Really,' Sumedha guffawed.

'Yes, he had worn Draupadi's sari to dupe the scoundrel. If Bhima can wear a sari to save his wife, why can I not wear a sari to help a friend get a wife? Now can you pass me the anklets.'

Sumedha had imagined Bhima in bed, dressed as a woman, trapping Kichaka between his thighs, crushing his chest with his mighty arms. 'The anklets, Sumedha,' Somvat had shouted shaking Sumedha out of his thoughts, 'Be a good husband and pass me the anklets. Both of them.'

As Sumedha had picked up the anklets, he had spilt the small box containing vermilion powder which Somvat was to smear in the parting of his hair. It fell over the toe-ring. It looked like blood. Blood dripping from the fangs of the fearsome Matrikas. That's when fear first crept into Sumedha's heart.

Chained to the walls in Vallabhi's dungeons, like an errant bull, Sumedha cursed his fate. No family. No wife. And soon no life. Was he paying for the misdeeds of the past? What could he do but endure? He had been beaten up mercilessly, dragged through the streets, humiliated in public, flogged, harassed and chained. All because he wanted a cow. Never before in his orphan life had he felt so alone, so miserable, so helpless and so afraid. He felt sorry for himself. More sorry for Somvat though. He did this for me. He did not have to. He already had his cow. Sumedha was engulfed by waves of guilt. Nobody cared if he lived or died except Somvat. And if Somvat died there were so many who cared for him. His uncle. His aunt. His cousin and sister-in-law, their teacher. Somvat had given up so much more. He remembered the times they spent together. Somvat would not eat a mango until Sumedha sucked on it first. Somvat would not start a meal until Sumedha joined him first. They wore each other's clothes. Slept on each other's beds. Friends? More than friends. Brothers? More than brothers. Wives would have torn them apart. But they had to marry if they wanted to enter the shrines, if they wished to perform puja and partake of the offerings of the yagna. Without wives they were incomplete. Without each other, they were incomplete. Could he live if Somvat died? Somvat's death would be his death. He was sure of it.

‘Who did you marry? A man or a woman?’ the guards asked Sumedha.

Sumedha did not know what to answer. If he said he was not married, then he would be punished for duping the queens. Men cannot marry men. So he replied, ‘I married a woman, of course.’

‘A woman with a man’s body or a woman’s body?’

‘I don’t know what happened in the temple. I married a true woman. I know her body. I cannot explain what happened in the temple. An apparition. A magician’s trick. A demon’s prank. Maybe sorcery. But I know I married Somvati. The rest I leave in your hands,’ Sumedha tried hard to sound convincing.

‘Matanga of Tarini-pur says Somvat is a boy, an orphan, just like you, that both of you study and serve in the temple complex of the goddess Tarini. You are not from Pratishthana, are you?’

Sumedha realized he had been caught. They knew where he came from. They knew everything about him. There was no escape. But he could not retract his words. That would make him a liar. Liars are flogged. In fear, he clung to his lie. ‘They are all lying. Somvati and I were married when we were children.’

‘Did the village witness it?’

‘No. I married as Gandharvas do. Nature was our witness. The goddesses were our witness. I tell you Somvati was always a woman. The village lies.’

‘Then who made Trigarta’s wife pregnant?’

Sumedha realized the guards knew the truth. They were entrapping him in his own lies. But he was afraid to admit he had lied. That he had tricked the royal family. He shook his head. ‘Please stop this. There is only one truth. I am a man. An orphan. I married Somvati, my best friend. My only friend. Please don’t harm her. She is a good girl. Let her go. She did nothing wrong.’

The guards found his words convincing. They did not know whom to believe. Matanga? Somvat? Sumedha? Or their own eyes?

The Danda-Nayak said, ‘If he speaks the truth, then we will earn demerit for keeping a husband and wife apart. Let us bring them together.’

‘What if he is not? We know what we saw,’ said the guards.

‘It is our mind playing tricks on us. Let us accept the truth of the moment. Here is a man. There is a woman. They claim to be husband and wife.’

Sumedha overheard the Danda-Nayak. What was he saying? A woman in the next cell? What had happened? He saw confusion in their eyes. Something had happened. Something strange. But what?

‘Does this disgust you?’ Somvat asked Sumedha, when they were finally brought together and led to the king’s court. The streets were lined with people. The very same who had abused them the previous day. Now, they were silent. Afraid. Were these two boys shape-shifting demons? Would they curse our children for making fun of them? Forgive us.

Sumedha and Somvat, lost in each other’s thoughts, were oblivious of the crowds. Somvat waited anxiously for Sumedha’s reaction. Sumedha replied. ‘Not at all.’ A secret prayer had finally been answered. Somvat heaved a sigh of relief. ‘Has your heart changed with your body?’ Sumedha asked.

Somvat replied, ‘Look into my eyes. Tell me if there is change.’

There was no change.

‘How did this happen?’ Sumedha asked.

‘I am not too sure. It has happened. Now at least we have hope.’

‘Did you let this happen only to save our lives?’

‘What do you think?’

Sumedha felt a change in Somvat. In himself too. Not change—the new body had forced a discovery. An acknowledgement of a truth. A warm feeling, hidden deep in their hearts. He remembered the days they spent running in the fields, dancing on the riverbanks, working together in the temple, eating together, happy just to see each other. He remembered those naps in the temple corridors, the dappled sunlight streaming through the windows, making Somvat’s skin glow. He remembered those nights when he could not sleep, wondering what life would be after marriage, when they would be forced to live apart.

‘Will you treat me differently now?’ asked Somvat.

‘Why should I?’ replied Sumedha. He looked at the chains, the guards, the lions at the gate they were passing through. ‘I am not afraid anymore.’

‘I am not afraid either,’ said Somvat.

THE HEARING



By force of habit, the Danda-Nayak brought Sumedha and Somvat to the audience chamber of the queen. He was stopped on the way. ‘Take them to the

maha-sabha,' said the guards.

In the pillared hall, surrounded by Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra elders, sat Yuvanashva on his golden seat with red cushions. The crown was placed on his head. In his hand was the golden bow. Realizing how important this moment was for their husband, Simantini and Pulomi decided to sit beside Yuvanashva and wave the yak-tail fly whisks. Keshini sat on the floor behind and held the ivory parasol over his head.

Yuvanashva had finally taken charge of his destiny.

At long last, a dispute in Vallabhi would be settled by a man. The elders of the four varnas, the local village chiefs, leaders of caravans, wandering bards and sages poured in to witness this momentous occasion.

The servants had a tough time providing seats to everyone. The rules of protocol had to be maintained so that no one took offence. Elders had to sit closer to the throne. High-ranking Kshatriyas had to be provided rugs made of blackbuck skin. Low-ranking Kshatriyas were given ordinary deer-skin rugs. Brahmanas had to be provided mats. Vaishyas had to be provided cushions. The Shudras sat on the floor, behind the throne. Both Matanga and Asanga sat on mats close to the throne so that they could hear both the king and the accused clearly. Mandavya sat to the left of the king. Vipula sat to his right.

Everybody wondered how Yuvanashva would settle this dispute. It had stoked a great deal of speculation in the streets. Everyone had an opinion. It had added spice to the otherwise orderly humdrum life of Vallabhi.

The two accused were brought before the king in chains. Had it not been for the chains, they looked like newly-weds. Sumedha in his white dhoti and uttarya lined with gold. Somvat with his red sari, yellow uttarya and jewellery that belonged to the Matrikas.

Vipula asked Sumedha, on behalf of the king, "Tell me the truth. Did you enter the temple with a man dressed as a woman or with a woman who was your wife?"

Sumedha replied, 'I came in with my soulmate, first wrapped in a woman's garment and now wrapped in a woman's body.'

'Trying to be a clever twister of words, are you?' said the Danda-Nayak, striking his staff on the floor. 'Speak plainly here. This is the king's court not a congregation of poets.'

Vipula said, 'Look on your right. That is Somvat's uncle and aunt, his cousin, and his cousin's wife. They say Somvat is a man.'

Sumedha said, 'They lie.'

Vipula said, 'Look to your left, Somvati. There is Trigarta. He says he helped you plant your seed in his wife's womb. She is now pregnant with child. The sapling of your seed. Do you deny this?'

Sumedha looked at Somvat. Somvat replied, from beneath the yellow uttarya that covered his head and face, 'No, I don't.' There was uproar in the mahasabha. Disbelief. Shock. The boy had admitted he was not a woman, but a man.

'Silence,' shouted the Danda-Nayak.

'I did plant the seed in Mamata's womb. That was then. Now, I am a woman. A chaste woman. The wife of Sumedha,' said Somvat.

Vipula said, 'Look behind you, Somvati. There is a widow there. She covers her face with a plantain leaf out of respect for the king. Behind her are two young girls. One of them, she says, was to marry Sumedha and the other was for you. What is to become of her if you say you are a woman? Who will marry her now?'

'Maybe,' shouted one Kshatriya elder, 'Sumedha must marry her too. Then he will have three wives. Two women and a man.' Everyone laughed.

'Silence,' shouted the Danda-Nayak.

'Circumstances have transformed me into a woman. This transformation will have consequences. I do not know who will marry Kaveri's daughter. All I know is that I will be ever-faithful to my husband.'

Sumedha held Somvati's hand. 'She is my only wife. I will look upon no other.'

Silence in the court was replaced by a buzz of conversation. Like a swarm of locusts passing over a placid lake.

'May I speak,' said the Acharya of Tarini-pur. The king nodded his assent. Silence returned to the court. 'Somvat is the only son of his late father. He is obliged to father a son, a child at least, otherwise his father will be trapped forever in the land of the dead. For the sake of his ancestors, he cannot be allowed to be a woman, even if his body is of one. As a child, he performed the funeral rites. Offered rice cakes to the Pitr, promised them he would father

children, help them return to the land of the living. He cannot go back on his words now.'

Yuvanashva thought of his ancestors. And the crows. 'Do you wish to abandon your forefathers?' Yuvanashva asked Somvat.

'I have already fathered a child,' said Somvat.

'That is not your child. It belongs to Trigarta. You sold your seed for a cow,' said Vipula.

'I don't have an answer then, Arya. All I know that I have the body of a woman now. How can I do what only a man can?'

'By living as a man. Marrying a woman. Denying this aberrant womanhood imposed upon you by circumstance,' suggested Yuvanashva.

'How will I father children?'

'Just like Trigarta. Through niyoga. Maybe by inviting Sumedha to your wife's bed.'

'I have accepted Sumedha as my husband. To abandon the husband is adharma for a wife.'

'To abandon your ancestors is adharma for a son,' said Vipula.

The case was getting interesting and complex. Yama put down his pen and Kama put down his bow to see what Yuvanashva would decide. Would he be Chakra-varti, the first after Bharata?

A servant entered the maha-sabha at that moment. It was Shilavati's handmaiden. 'I have a message from the queen,' she said.

'What is it?' said Yuvanashva, irritated by the intrusion.

'The queen wishes to share something that she just learnt from her spies. On the tenth day of the war at Kuru-kshetra, Shikhandi rode into battle on Krishna's chariot. This means Pandavas accepted Shikhandi, born a woman, as a man, worthy of riding alongside them into battle and raise the bow. The Pandavas have won. Dharma stands on their side. Let us therefore do what they did. Accept this boy, born a man, as a woman. Treat him thus. Krishna would do that. It will be dharma.'

Yuvanashva saw sense in his mother's words. But he did not like her interfering in this, his first appearance in public. He felt she was making a mockery of his royal authority, publicly invalidating his intelligence by her untimely advice. The umbilical cord had to be cut. 'Tell my mother, it is for me,

the king of Vallabhi, not his mother or any other woman, to decide what is appropriate. What is dharma for the Kurus need not be dharma for the Turuvasus. Now leave this room and let me judge.’ Shilavati’s servant, who walked in with head held high, went away with head bent.

Turning back to the boys, Yuvanashva asked Somvat, ‘Why should we treat you as a woman?’

‘Because I have the body of a woman.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Because I feel like a woman.’

‘Was it always so?’

‘No. Yesterday I thought of Sumedha as a friend. Today I feel he is my husband.’

‘So you admit, yesterday you tricked the queens, masqueraded as a woman to get a cow.’ The courtiers smiled. The king had trapped the boy. He was a clever king.

Sumedha came to Somvat’s rescue, ‘When he draped himself in women’s clothes yesterday, in my eyes he was my wife. For who else but a wife will make selfless sacrifices for a man. He sacrificed his masculinity for me. I have no other soulmate but he. No, my king, yesterday he did not masquerade as my wife. He was my wife. As he is today.’

‘I don’t think so. A man cannot be a wife. Just because Sumedha has a womb now, he cannot be a woman. He was born as a man. The dharma-shastras say that roles and responsibilities of a Manava are determined at birth by his biology and the lineage of his father. You were born a man in a Brahmana family. You can never ever give up being a man or a Brahmana. You are forever a man and a Brahmana.’

‘O king, why is it that Vallabhi, which allowed a woman to rule as king, does not allow a man to live as wife?’ asked Somvat. There was hesitation in his voice but the tone was razor sharp.

The court could not believe what the accused was saying. He was openly confronting the royal family. But there was truth in that argument. Shilavati was king.

‘My mother never wore the crown. She was regent. No rule of dharma was ever broken by the Turuvasus. Don’t ever suggest that,’ shouted Yuvanashva. He

felt his temper rising.

Somvat lowered his head. Vipula intervened, sensing the king's rage, 'The king is kind. He will forgive you. Just admit you were masquerading for profit. He who speaks the truth is never punished. He will let you go.'

'Provided,' interrupted Yuvanashva, still annoyed by the Brahmana's insolence, 'You both live as men. Marry the widow's daughters. Have children. Fulfil your roles as Brahmanas.'

Holding Somvat's hand firmly, in full view of the court, Sumedha said, 'Yes, we were masquerading for profit. I was desperate for a cow. For a wife. But now I have a wife. I will marry no one else.'

Somvat joined Sumedha, 'I am a woman. I will not marry a woman. That is adharma. I have only one husband. It is Sumedha. We will not live a lie because it is convenient to *your* dharma.'

There was commotion in court. 'Rip out the tongue of that impertinent boy. Does he not know how to speak to the keeper of dharma?' shouted the Vaishyas. The Danda-Nayak raised his hand. Silence returned.

'Think of your family,' said the Shudras from behind the throne, 'Think of how you wrench their heart by your stubbornness.'

'Circumstances have given us these bodies and these feelings. All we ask you is to accommodate them in your kingdom. If you bless us, our families will bless us too. All will be well,' said Sumedha.

Before the king could say anything, Vipula spoke up, 'Accommodating your feelings is out of the question. Dharma is not wet clay to be moulded for comfort. It is a baked pot. Like water, your mind must conform to its shape. You ask the king to break the pot to accommodate you. That is impossible. Dharma may seem rigid but it ensures social stability, hence peace and prosperity. You must conform. By demanding that the rules of social conduct be modified for your feelings, you challenge the very foundations of civilization, foundations that have served Ila-vrita well since time immemorial. Your feelings threaten everyone's order. Give up your feelings and embrace dharma or suffer the consequences.'

'Think carefully before you speak,' said Yuvanashva.

Sumedha and Somvat spoke in one voice, 'We choose our feelings and accept your decision whatever it may be.'

That sealed the fate of the boys. ‘They are not Brahmanas. They are Chandalas. No, not even that. They are Rakshasas. Animals. They must be driven out into the forest,’ said Vipula. He ripped out the sacred thread that hung over Sumedha’s left shoulder. He found Somvat’s sacred thread round his waist. He pulled that out too. ‘This auspicious thread must not adorn polluted bodies and polluted minds,’ he said.

‘Exile is not appropriate. These boys who have abandoned dharma are vessels of profanity. If we let them go, they will carry this profanity to other lands. And for that Vallabhi and its king will earn demerit,’ said the Kshatriyas. ‘It is best they be put to death.’

Then Yuvanashva made his decision. ‘Let fire, not man, claim the life of those who reject dharma,’ said Yuvanashva.

Just as the Danda-Nayak was about to leave the court, Mandavya asked that the boys be brought to him. He whispered in their ears. ‘Listen to me carefully. I am old enough to be your great grandfather and have seen much of life to know there is wisdom in what I say. I also speak on behalf of the Turuvasu kings. It pains me to see boys as young as you throwing their lives away in the pursuit of love. Just remember, Vallabhi has rejected your choices, not you. You could have had a long fruitful life within this kingdom if you had conformed to dharma. You chose desire over duty. It was your choice. Yours alone. Hence this fate is also your choice, not an imposition of this court. Accept it with dignity and walk into the fire. Don’t force the Danda-Nayak or the Chandalas to push you in. Resistance will only mean that you disagree with the decision of those appointed by the gods to institute and maintain social order. Such display of disagreement will make matters worse in the land of the dead where Yama, supreme lord of dharma, maintains your account books.’

THE SENTENCE



In keeping with tradition, the Danda-Nayak asked the boys, ‘What is your last wish?’

‘Let us burn together in the same pyre,’ said the boys.

When this was communicated to the king, he lost his temper once again. ‘Burn them together? Like husband and wife. That will not be permitted.’

‘But, Rajan,’ the Danda-Nayak tried to explain.

The king did not let him finish. His eyes were red, his lips quivered in irritation. ‘They are not sacrifices. They are criminals. Their death does not bring merit to society. It merely rids society of aberrations. We don’t have to consider their wishes.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Enough of these discussions. Just drag them to the two corners of the city. The “husband” to the northern gate and the “wife” to the southern gate. Shove them into the fire and hold them down if they resist. Let us not discuss this any further. I am king and this is my final decision.’

TWO PYRES



There was a new moon in the sky that night. A cold winter’s night. Uncaring stars glittered in the skies above. Two fires burned on either side of the gates of Vallabhi. Chandalas sat around it. Dogs barked. The crowds had dispersed.

These were not funerals.

A few hours earlier two men had walked into the two fires. The Chandalas said, ‘They were just sixteen. Boys actually. And they walked right in, without a fight. We had prepared ourselves to push them in and hold them down. Stop them from trying to escape. This is what usually happens once the fire singes the flesh. The courage dissolves. The yearning to survive returns. But in this case, once in, no one came out. There were no agonizing cries. Just a silent submission to death. As if life outside the flames was even more painful. There was no last wish. No pleas for mercy. No messages for loved ones. There was fear in their eyes. With great effort they held back tears. Then, taking a deep breath as if seeking strength, they jumped right in.’

‘Are you feeling sorry for them?’ asked the Danda-Nayak.

The Chandalas wanted to say yes. But they knew the Danda-Nayak would not understand. He seemed like one of those men who believe a man ceases to be human once he breaks the code of dharma. He would find it hard to accept that every criminal is a human being, just like him, with feelings. A yes would mean they sympathized with criminals. That would put their livelihood in jeopardy. So they replied diplomatically, ‘No one deserves to be burnt alive at sixteen.’

‘It was their choice,’ said the Danda-Nayak.

‘Sumedha and Somvat. Sumedha and Somvati,’ the Danda-Nayak kept chanting these names again and again. The Chandalas did not like this. They did not like to know whose body they were burning. It gave them a personality. An

identity. Someone's child. Someone's parent. Names made them wonder of the life lead by the dead before they came to the funeral pyre. The sufferings they left behind, and the desires they still clung too. Such thoughts made it difficult for them to sleep. Burning a nameless corpse was so much better—like burning garbage, a chore that did not stir a thought or a feeling.

The Danda-Nayak could not wait to return home and be with his wife. He had seen the tenderness as the two boys parted. They were not two boys then. They were husband and wife, in his opinion. Chakravaka and Chakravaki, birds separated by the river of fate. But his opinion did not matter. Only the opinions of kings mattered. Royal opinion was dharma.

He waited for the king, who was personally overseeing the punishment, relishing this moment of absolute power no doubt. The smell of burning flesh disturbed the Danda-Nayak. A soft moan reached his ears. Startled, he stood up. 'Are they still alive?'

'Don't be stupid,' said the Chandalas. 'They are barely bones now. It is just the wind. Why don't you go home? You look tired. I assure you the boys are dead and cannot run away. I will give you the bones tomorrow.'

'No. I have been ordered to perform the shraadh before dawn. Otherwise these boys will haunt the city as Brahma-Rakshasas.'

The Chandalas' eyes widened. 'Are you saying these boys were Brahmanas? We did not see the sacred thread. Why were we not told? Before a Brahmana is burnt alive we have to make offerings before Bhairava, god of the crematorium. He protects us from the crime of participating in the death of a Brahmana. We earn no demerit. We are doomed. In Yama's book we will be recorded as Brahmana-killers.'

'Don't worry, the king will compensate you handsomely. You can get someone to do a rite of purification. The threads were removed by the king's new guru. Vipula, son of Mandavya. He said they had polluted their bodies and their minds and hence were unfit to wear them. They were lower than Chandalas. Lower than animals. This made the decision to execute them easier for the king.'

'We will be purified, Arya,' said the chief of the Chandalas. 'But who will purify the king? With or without the sacred threads, they were children of Brahmanas, hence Brahmanas. The two boys, as you claim they were, were not

married. They had no children. They were killed violently. They were not cremated properly. No one mourned for them. They are bound to return as Brahma-Rakshasas and haunt their killer. For they are lost between the land of the living and the land of the dead, unable to make their journey across the Vaitrani. We fear for our king.'

THE POTION



They had been all but forgotten. The two brothers, Yaja and Upayaja, busy with their chants and charms in the special precinct within the palace walls. The potion was almost ready. The Siddhas felt its throbbing power.

But then they noticed a shift in the energies. A distraction. A commotion. They realized no one was paying attention to the ceremony. There were crows flying over the altar. 'The Kshatriya guards posted outside the precinct are looking elsewhere,' said Yaja. The Brahmanas were conspicuous by their absence. Even the seat in the elephant stable reserved for the queen was vacant. 'Where is everybody?'

Upayaja shut his eyes and opened up his mind. He said, 'They are out there peeping out of windows, standing on rooftops, leaning out of gateway, lining the streets. Men and women. Priests, warriors, farmers, traders. Young and old. Everyone. They are watching a spectacle. Yuvanashva is asserting his royal authority. Flesh is burning. A village is wailing. I hear screams. No, not two boys. A young couple. Man and woman. No, wait, I am not sure. But I feel pain. Regret. Guilt. Suffering. Anguish. And the outrage of a city. I can feel Shilavati's horror and resignation to her fate. Order is being established. A new king's order. But beneath the order festers something deep, dark and terrible. A rage. A frustration. Yaja, something has happened in Vallabhi that has made Yama tremble and Kama frown. Our potion of life has been contaminated by death.'

Yaja looked around, 'The seed of Yuvanashva is ready but where is the soil. Where are the queens? Do we pour it into the fire-altar?'

'No, let us not. Agni will spit it out. There is confusion in the air. A disruption of order. Who is the true patron of this ritual? The king of Vallabhi. Only now it is Yuvanashva. Before it was Shilavati, without whose permission we would not have been allowed through the city gates. To whom does this potion belong then? Is it the seed of the son who begged or the mother who allowed? No,

brother. Something does not feel right. The flow of rasa is turbulent. There is no rhythm. We don't know who is king and who is not. Who is man and who is not. Who is father and who is not. The blood of the old order has seeped into the ground in Kuru-kshetra. But the new order still has to establish itself. There is flux. The account books of Yama are unclear. Kama's tears have caused the ink to smudge.'

Yaja grasped the rim of the pot containing the magic potion using his right hand. Upayaja did the same using his left hand. They stood up and left the precinct, the pot between them. They walked through the palace corridors. The paintings on the wall seem to come to life as the potion splashed around in the pot. The birds flapped their wings. The trees swayed. The lion stalked the elephant. Yaja and Upayaja did not care. They saw a palace deserted. The lamps and torches lit up lonely empty corridors. For thirteen years this palace yearned for a new life. And now they were all smitten by death.

The Siddhas finally reached the maha-sabha of the Turuvasu kings. The pillared hall. The empty throne with its red cushions and ivory parasol. A single lamp burning next to it. They kept the pot next to the lamp. 'Let the king decide whose seed it is. Let the king decide which soil it should be. He knows best, who should be man and who should be woman.' So saying the brothers slipped out of the palace and returned to the forest.

THE GHOSTS



Yuvanashva rode into the palace late at night. He was tired. Thirsty. His body was covered with sweat and dust. As he passed through the gates he saw the guards. They stood up and saluted him. He saw fear in their eyes. And respect. His royal authority had been clearly established. Now he was truly king.

Alighting from his chariot, he went straight to the queen's courtyard. It was empty. No woman was there to greet him. Not even his wives. They were all in the inner chambers, quivering, silent, nervous. They had seen Yuvnashva lose his temper and get his way. They did not want to cross his path. Yuvanashva liked the feeling. The rush of power. He felt more like a man than ever before.

Yuvanashva then decided to go to the maha-sabha. He wanted to sit on the throne for some time. Then he would bathe. And eat. And then go to one of his

queens. Any queen. Maybe all three of them together. He could do anything tonight.

As he fell back into the cushions, he imagined the room crowded with all the Kshatriya elders saluting him. His warriors cheering him. Flowers being showered on him. He saw the Turuvasu banner held high up fluttering against the sky. He saw adoration reflecting in his mother's eyes. Awe in the eyes of his wives. It felt really good.

Even the crows were happy. Soon the potion would be ready and his queens would give him sons. Three sons from three wives. This was the glory he craved. What he could not obtain from Kuru-kshetra had come to him in Vallabhi. He thanked the gods for it. He thanked the Angirasa for constantly telling him to be patient. Yes, good things do come to those who wait.

His throat was parched. He wanted water. Or milk. 'Is anyone there?' he shouted. No one came forward. The hall was empty and dark. 'I want water. Is anyone there?' No one responded. Yuvanashva felt his temper rising once more. 'I will flog the servants tomorrow. There must be someone here at all time.'

Then he heard a familiar voice. 'Father,' it said. 'Father,' it said again.

Then another voice. 'Father.'

'Who is it?' asked Yuvanashva.

'Your sons,' said the two voices in unison.

'I have no sons,' said Yuvanashva, as he tried to shut out the voices and go to sleep.

'We are your sons. You created us.'

Yuvanashva turned around startled. Beyond the light of the flickering lamp, in the shadows, he saw a man and a woman.

'Come closer. Show me your face.'

'No, father. You will not like what you will see. It is all burnt. Scarred beyond recognition.'

'Who are you?'

'Your sons.'

'Stop this. Who are you?' said Yuvanashva, his temper rising as it had done earlier in the day. The two retreated back. They were scared. Yuvanashva did not want them to go. 'Don't be afraid. I will not harm you. But I have no children.'

Tell me who you are. Don't mock me. It hurts when a childless man is called father.'

'You have us, father. Two children. You created us.'

'Who are you? Please tell me. Who are you? If I am your father, I have a right to know your names.'

'I am Sumedha, father. All my life I looked for a father. In death, I found one.'

'And I am Somvati, father,' said the woman. 'Your daughter. I apologize for hurting you. I apologize for becoming a woman. But had I not become a woman, you would never have become my father.'

Fear crept into Yuvanashva. These were the Brahma-Rakshasas he had been warned about. They had come to torment him. 'Go away, you ghosts. You are dead. Go away.'

'We cannot. Yama asks us many questions that we cannot answer. What is our varna. Are we Brahmanas? To which ashrama do we belong? Are we brahmacharis or grihasthis? What is our linga? Are we men or women? They will not let us cross the Vaitarni unless we answer these questions. So we come to you, our creator, our father for the answer.'

'Go away. You know what I think of you. Yama must let you pass.'

'He won't. He says both of us are men. But we are not. One of us is a woman. He does not accept that. Says the king's decree is final. We refuse to cross the Vaitarni unless he accepts us as husband and wife. Until then we cannot be Pitrs. We remain here as Pisachas.'

The lamp in the maha-sabha was still. The darkness seemed animated. Alive. 'Is somebody there?' Yuvanashva shouted. There was no response. He was all alone with the two ghosts. Would they harm him? Possess him? Drive him mad?

The ghosts read his mind, 'No, we cannot harm you. We are trapped here. Alone. With no one to talk to but you, our creator, our father. You are our only companion on this shore of Vaitarni. We will never leave you alone.'

Yuvanashva pretended he did not hear the ghosts. 'Is someone there? I am thirsty. Get me some water.'

'Father, are you thirsty? Don't worry we will fetch you water. We will, we promise. We are dutiful offspring. Oh look,' said the Pisachas. 'There is a pot of water right next to you. Drink it. It will quench your thirst.'

Yuvanashva saw the red earthenware with elaborate geometrical patterns round its neck. He picked it up and drank its contents. The water was cool. As it passed down his throat, he felt a sense of peace and tranquility. His limbs relaxed. The tension vanished. There was no anger any more. No determination to prove. No angst. No rage. Yuvanashva felt as if cool river water was being poured over his limbs.

‘Is your thirst quenched now, father?’ asked the Pisachas.

‘Yes,’ said Yuvanashva. He looked outside the window. Dawn broke. The two Pisachas disappeared.

A gentle breeze brought in the fragrance of forest flowers to his throne. He heard a distant chanting. The voice of Yaja and Upayaja. ‘Now that Vishnu has prepared the field, let Brahma bring forth the seed. May Vishwakarma shape the child and Vayu breathe in the life.’

The chant felt nice. Like a lullaby. It put him to sleep.

Book Four



EARLY MORNING SICKNESS



Streaks of light pierced through the night sky. It was Aruni, the god of dawn, heralding the arrival of the sun. Shilavati looked out of her window and remembered a song of the bards, ‘Look at the elder brother of the sun or shall we say his elder sister. Aruni or Usha. Formless, shapeless, what is dawn? Man or woman, god or goddess? Born prematurely before the organs could be formed, even the mother does not know.’

Shilavati had tossed and turned all night in her bed, unable to sleep, haunted by a terrifying dream of the unsmiling Yama performing a yagna, tossing a charred corpse in the sacrificial pit, asking her, amidst the cawing of a hundred crows, ‘So, who is right? You or your son? Is this flesh that of a man or a woman? Somvat or Somvati? Does it matter? Does it really matter when the flesh is burnt alive?’

Shilavati had got up earlier than usual. She bathed and lit the lamp in her audience chamber herself. The light bounced on the walls. The lions painted on the walls let out a roar; the elephants raised their trunks. But not for her. She heard the twang of a bow. Not hers. But Yuvanashva’s. The king of Vallabhi had finally raised his bow of kingship and shot an arrow. Not Kama’s arrow but Yama’s. Creating no life but taking two.

Shilavati waited for her son to come and place his forehead at her feet as he always did at dawn each day. He did not come. The sun rose. The lamp burnt itself out.

Seven days passed. Shilavati waited. But Yuvanashva did not come. No one came. No guards, no ministers. No petitioners seeking justice. No village chiefs bearing gifts. No envoys from neighbouring kings seeking tribute. No servants. No maids. Not even Mandavya. She heard a lot of movement in the corridors around her courtyard but she did not show any curiosity. If it is important, they will tell me, she told herself.

I have been forgotten, Shilavati fumed. So soon? No doubt everyone was paying obeisance to her son who had asserted his royal authority so forcefully. She imagined them fawning over him in the maha-sabha. Even Mandavya, sitting at his feet, looking noble, giving him advice. Shilavati chose to respond to the situation with indifference. I don't need them, she said. She sat quietly in the now empty audience chamber, staring at the walls, at the lions and the elephants, and the turtle on the floor, too proud to let the tears fall.

Finally, on the eighth day, Mandavya entered her courtyard. Before he could say anything, she snapped, 'So you finally come to me. All well with the king? I guess he is so busy in the maha-sabha that he cannot spare even a moment for his mother. All well with Vallabhi? Any more boys killed?'

Ignoring her, Mandavya bowed his head and spoke dispassionately, 'The Siddhas have disappeared. The pot with the potion was found upside down. And the king is sick. Violently so. He has been waking up every morning feeling nauseous. He retches and vomits all day, unable to hold any food down. His body has grown limp. He can barely stand. He is miserable that he has been unable to come to you. He sent me to convey his apology.'

Shilavati felt she had been rebuked by the guru of the Turuvasu clan. 'Since when?' she asked, her voice no longer loud and sharp.

'Since seven days.'

'Why did no one tell me?'

'Why did you not ask, Shilavati? The servants fear telling you anything unless asked. And what about your famous spies? They must have told you everything about Dwaraka and Hastina-puri, but why have they not told you of your son's condition? Is it the pride of a queen that has come in the way of maternal

affection, that you have not even bothered to find out if all fares well with your son?’

All those foolish imaginings that kept her from her son. Shilavati felt small and stupid. ‘Still, they should have told me. Oh my poor child,’ she wailed.

‘Everybody assumed you knew.’ Shilavati was silent. ‘You are angry, I sense it,’ said Mandavya. ‘And perhaps your anger is justified. But who are you angry with? Your fate? Vallabhi? Or your son who loves you?’ Shilavati looked at the floor feeling ashamed. There was her son in misery. And here she was nursing her grudges against him. Mandavya continued, ‘I am going to ask the maids to replaster the walls of this audience chamber. Replace the lions and the elephants with trees and creepers and grazing cows.’

Shilavati looked at Mandavya, her eyes flashing fire. ‘Why?’

‘It is time to retire, Shilavati. Make way for the next generation.’

‘So, I have served my purpose. The Turuvasus have no need for me anymore. I am being shown my place.’

‘See it any way you want, Shilavati. It is time you accept that your son, not you, is king of Vallabhi. Your ill wishes make him sick.’

Shilavati was surprised by the accusation. ‘You think I am making my son sick. How could you even think so?’ A horrified look in her eyes.

‘Everybody in the palace thinks so. They say first you prevented him from marrying. Then you made him sterile. And now, when everything else has failed, you are trying to kill him, as you killed your own husband. Why else would you, a mother, not go to him when he lies sick in bed? Everybody in the palace is concerned about Yuvanashva’s health. And you are not even aware.’

Shilavati let out a cry and broke down. ‘How can anyone think like that? Those wicked people. Those horrible creatures. I loved my husband. I love my son. I love Vallabhi. They are my children. And they all hate me. I should hate them. You Turuvasus brought me here to use me. And now that I have been used well, you spit me out.’

‘It is not about you, Shilavati. Its about Vallabhi. About social order. You were custodian, never king. Now the man whose destiny it has always been to be king of Vallabhi is sick. Matanga does not know what troubles him. Rather than defending yourself, don’t you think you should rush to his side, nurse him?’

‘I don’t think I should go. My touch may kill him,’ said Shilavati sarcastically.

‘Those are people’s perceptions. I know how much you care for Yuvanashva. I know how much you loved Prasenajit. By not asking about your son, by not going to him, you are just confirming people’s beliefs.’

‘I didn’t know,’ Shilavati wailed.

‘I know that. They don’t want to know that. They just want to conclude. You know, better than I, how people think. A woman in power is never liked. It has been long since you were seen as a suffering widow and the custodian of an orphan’s inheritance. Your ambition has distanced you from your son and your people. The people need their king. And the king needs his mother. Go to him.’

‘No,’ said Shilavati. ‘He does not need me. He has his wives. He has his guru. He has Vallabhi too. Has anybody thought that he may be sick because the gods are angry. He has killed two innocent boys, moved away from dharma with his unjust decision. He is no life-giver but a life-taker. Is that the kind of king Vallabhi needs?’

‘Stop competing, Shilavati. He is your son, the king of Vallabhi, whether you like it or not. Kama’s arrow makes you cling. But Yama’s noose will force you to release your grip. Give up. Everything comes to an end eventually.’

Shilavati did not reply. She kept sobbing, feeling sorry for herself.

Mandavya left the queen’s chamber angry with Shilavati. She was capable of so much more. Had he misjudged her? How could power corrupt her? She was a woman.

On a faraway hill, enveloped by winter clouds, the Angirasa sensed Mandavya’s rage. ‘He thinks a woman should respond differently to the corrupting influence of power,’ said one. The rest laughed.

THE ABANDONED YAGNA-SHALA



On the day after the burning of the two boys, Mandavya and Vipula had found the ceremonial pot, empty and turned upside down in the maha-sabha next to the throne.

‘Who left it here?’ Mandavya had asked the guards.

‘The two Siddhas,’ they replied.

‘Where are they now?’

‘They left at night from the eastern gate.’

‘Why did you not stop them?’

‘We were scared.’

Mandavya and Vipula rushed to the enclosure where the yagna had taken place. They found all the ritual pots overturned and all the ladles broken. The altar had been dismantled. The charred wood kicked in every direction. Butter had been spilt. The fruits and flowers crushed and mixed with dirt. The sacred diagrams had been wiped out in a hurry. ‘This is not a good thing,’ said Vipula.

‘We must perform a ritual to cleanse this place and to pacify the angry gods,’ said Mandavya. He realized that the previous evening the fire-god had been fed living human flesh. This would have disturbed the equilibrium of the cosmos, unsettled the ritual of the Siddhas. He told the guards to fetch the Vaishya elders, ‘Tell them to bring to the palace a hundred and eight cows. I want the sound of their lowing to fill this space. I want them to shed dung and urine in this enclosure. This place which was to create life now has the stench of death. It is like a womb stripped of life. The cows will help wash away all inauspiciousness.’

‘Then this entire enclosure with everything in it must be set aflame, and the ashes must be cast far away from the city,’ said Vipula.

Yuvanashva meanwhile lay in bed cradled by his three wives, a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach. He rested his head on Simantini’s lap. Pulomi rubbed his feet with oil. Keshini massaged his hands. The maid gave Simantini some freshly boiled rice on a plantain leaf. ‘No, not rice,’ said Yuvanashva turning away.

‘Then what?’ asked Simantini, giving the rice back to the maid.

‘Tamarind.’

Simantini held her husband against her bosom. So powerful and frightening in court just seven days ago, now so weak and helpless. Yuvanashva snuggled, his eyes shut, feeling safe in Simantini’s arms.

‘Shall we send for the musicians?’ asked Keshini.

‘No. No music. Just silence,’ said Yuvanashva. Pulomi started to get up, ‘Don’t go, Pulomi. None of you leave my side.’ Suddenly he opened his eyes, looking anxious, ‘Where is my mother? Why has she not come to me? Is she well? Does she know of my condition? She may wonder why I have stopped greeting her in the morning.’

The queens looked at each other and did not reply. 'Rest, Arya,' said Simantini. 'Mother knows everything and is offering prayers for your health. She will be here soon.' The words comforted Yuvanashva. He shut his eyes and soon fell asleep.

Matanga had been called. He noted that the sickness lasted only in the morning, followed by an intense craving for sour food in the evening. He did not understand what was happening. He wondered if the sickness was a manifestation of his guilt at having taken over the reins of the kingdom, rather forcefully, from his mother. But he kept his opinions to himself. 'Too much bile,' he told the queens as he handed over a potion that the king had to take along with the evening meal. In the morning, however, the sickness caused the king to throw out the evening meal as well as the potion, making him weaker than ever.

The queens were scared. The guards who had found the king sleeping on the throne on the day after the burning of the boys had said he kept mumbling something about ghosts. 'Could it be the curse of the two boys?' Keshini wondered aloud. 'I have heard that the angry glance of a dying man can cause sickness.'

'Or maybe, it is the curse of the Siddhas? They left without informing anybody,' said Pulomi.

'Nonsense,' said Simantini. 'It must be something he ate. No more meat for him.'

'That's what you said yesterday,' said Keshini. 'But he insisted on having mutton with his evening meal. Mark my words, this evening he will ask for fish.'

'Spicy and sour,' mumbled Yuvanashva without opening his eyes. The queens smiled, feeling relieved.

'Maybe we should organize an utsava. A grand performance of dancers and singers to wipe away the mood of melancholy those two scoundrels brought into the city,' said Vipula.

'An utsava now? But that would be highly inappropriate, Rajan,' said Mandavya, 'Especially with all of Ila-vrita mourning the slaughter at Kurukshetra.'

'So what?' said Vipula. 'We did not participate in the slaughter. No one in Vallabhi killed or was killed. Why should household quarrels of the Kuru clan dictate the royal decisions of the Turuvasus?'

Mandavya looked at his son. He realized that the sidelining of Shilavati was as much about Vipula gaining power as it was about Yuvanashva claiming his birthright. ‘My son is a Brahmana by birth but a Kshatriya at heart,’ he thought, ‘So much like Drona and Ashwatthama.’ He felt sorry. Yes, the war at Kurukshetra marked an end of an era. It was the duty of Brahmanas to connect man with God, temper worldly ambition with spiritual truths. With men like Drona and Vipula that tempering had stopped. Dharma was now all about power.

Mandavya realized why the Angirasa constantly said that they were witnessing the dawn of Kali-yuga, the age of spiritual darkness. He was neither unhappy nor bitter. ‘Life has taken a decision for me,’ he said. He went to his hermitage and asked Punyakshi, ‘Mother of my children, shall we go to the forest? We have outlived our utility.’

Punyakshi stopped kneading dough. She washed her hands, picked up her walking stick and joined her husband. In the forest, after all these years, she would have him all to herself. No more competing with Vallabhi. No more competing with Shilavati.

THE COMPANY OF GHOSTS



Meanwhile, in Hastina-puri, a triumphant Yudhishtira realized victory does not guarantee happiness. The palace he entered was full of widows. No children. The war had claimed not only the hundred sons of Gandhari but also the five sons of Draupadi. Arjuna had lost two more sons, Abhimanyu and Iravan, born to other wives. Bhima’s son by Hidimbi, Ghatatkocho, was also dead. ‘Who will inherit my kingdom?’ Yudhishtira wailed. ‘Will the Kurus be cursed like the Turuvasus? Will Hastina-puri too be another Vallabhi where fields are fertile and palaces barren?’

But that was not to be.

Barely a fortnight after the war, Abhimanyu’s widow, Uttari, princess of Matsya, married a month before the war, announced she was pregnant. News of new life brought back cheer into the lives of the Pandavas.

‘Abhimanyu was just a boy,’ cried Yuvanashva’s wives. ‘But before he died he proved himself to be both a man in battle and a man in bed. So much more than our husband.’ Yuvanashva overheard this. He withdrew from his wives.

Shilavati noticed the crows were silent since that fateful night when the two boys were burnt alive. Sure enough, as the astrologers had once warned, silence did not guarantee sleep. She tossed and turned all night in her bed, feeling rejected and betrayed. Unloved and alone.

‘Perhaps they were more interested in me not being queen than in my son becoming father,’ reasoned Shilavati because she missed the crows.

The ghosts laughed. Only Yuvanashva heard them.

As the weeks passed, Yuvanashva became moody and irritable. He could eat nothing. He could not even drink milk. ‘Leave me alone,’ he told his wives when they fussed around him. They retreated quietly. After he had burnt the boys, his temper terrified them.

When Yuvanashva was alone, whenever he was alone, which was more frequent than before, when he retired into the maha-sabha and the sun had set, the ghosts came to him.

At first they bothered him. He tried ignoring them. But they would not leave him alone. They would insist on being around. They told him stories of their childhood. Of Tarini and Tarini-pur. The nymphs on the temple walls. The boys in the village pond.

Sumedha’s ghost would say, ‘They called him “donkey”.’

Somvati’s ghost would hide her face and giggle, ‘Please don’t embarrass me in front of father.’

Gradually Yuvanashva started enjoying their company more than the company of his wives. They did not expect anything of him. They accepted him for who he was. They always sensed his mood and behaved accordingly. Keeping quiet when he needed silence. Amusing him when he needed amusement. Telling him stories. Lending him a ear when he wanted to speak.

He loved resting in bed and looking at the movements of the planet Venus. The ghosts told him, ‘That is the one-eyed Shukra. He hung himself upside down from a tree over a fire until Shiva revealed to him the secret of Sanjivani Vidya. With this secret he helps the subterranean Asuras regenerate and regrow in spring after the celestial Devas kill them in the annual autumn war.’

One night, as he lay in bed, watching Venus, listening to another of the stories narrated by the two ghosts, Yuvanashva ran his fingers over his left inner thigh and discovered a lump, the size of a lemon. It quivered under his fingers.

THE PULSE



The lump grew in size. Yuvanashva's nausea decreased and his appetite increased. He wanted food all the time. Mangoes. Lots of mangoes. Green ones and golden ones. And bananas. And sweets made of coconut and cream. He washed it down with milk, sweet milk. Sometimes he had strange cravings, 'Mud. I feel like eating mud.'

'I think the king is pregnant,' said Sumedha's ghost within Yuvanashva's earshot.

'Men cannot get pregnant,' said Somvati's ghost.

'If Somvat can become Somvati, why can't Yuvanashva be with child?'

Yuvanashva ignored the ghosts and ordered his wives to cook him some prawns. 'Make them spicy,' he said.

That night the ghosts told Yuvanashva, 'Call your doctor. This lump is growing in size. You can barely walk or stand on the chariot. Something is not right.'

The next day, the lump was bigger and Yuvanashva finally sent for Matanga.

Matanga had left for Tarini-pur. He had gone to collect herbs he grew in his wife's kitchen garden which are rich in medicinal sap in spring. He would return only before the rains. Asanga came instead.

Simantini and Pulomi were with the king. Asanga touched the lump. And felt a pulse. A rapid pulse. A rhythm quite different from the king's pulse. 'Is it a boil?' asked Pulomi.

'No, it is not warm. And it isn't tender.'

'His appetite has increased. He wants more spice in his food. And he eats for two.'

'And the movement of his bowels?'

'Normal,' said Simantini.

'How do you know?' asked Yuvanashva, looking towards her, suddenly uncomfortable.

She smiled. 'I was worried. I checked with the servants. And his urine is clear.' Yuvanashva had not realized his ablutions were part of palace discussions.

'There is a build-up of wind and water in his constitution. I will prepare a potion, bitter and fiery, to balance that,' said Asanga.

As Asanga was about to leave, Keshini entered the king's chamber. He folded his hands and saluted her. Keshini recognized him. She felt a flutter in her heart. She had hardly seen him since she came to the palace. Only on ceremonial occasions. He confined himself to the king's courtyard where the queens rarely went. Memories enveloped her. Early morning chill. The furnace. Warm pots with strange spouts. Meetings at the gate. Before the palace. Before the burning of the boys.

Asanga remembered Lajja-gauri on seeing Keshini. The spreadeagled legs of the faceless goddess lying in the kitchen garden. The lotus flower was still there on the little girl he once loved but it was dry and lifeless. The limbs of Lajja-gauri seemed tired. The body was oozing blood. Dead blood. A rhythmic flow of blood.

Suddenly, something struck Asanga. He turned around and went back to feel the king's lump. Its pulse had a familiar rhythm. A tempo of life yet to come. It could not be. Only women had such a pulse in the second month of pregnancy. Something was not right.

As he left the palace, he saw servants pulling down a giant pavilion. 'The sages left this place with the fire still burning in the altar. They did not even conclude the sacrifice properly,' said the guard who was leading Asanga out. Yes, the Siddhas. They had come to do what he and his father had failed to do. Give the queens a child. But the ritual had failed. Or had it?

Asanga was disturbed. He waited for his father to return.

UNNATURAL OR A MIRACLE?



Spring was giving way to summer when Matanga returned. Asanga asked him, 'Is it possible for a man to get pregnant?'

'Yes,' said Matanga, without even pausing for a moment.

'Then why does the manual of Bhrigu not mention it?' asked a surprised Asanga.

'Because it is sorcery and not science.'

'What is the difference?'

'Science is the facilitation of the possible. Magic is the occurrence of the impossible. You and I can function within the boundaries of probability.'

'How so?'

‘You and I can fix a bone or heal a wound but the sorcerer can replace a cut-off arm. We can delay death. The sorcerer can bring the dead back to life. We can make a woman fat or thin. Sorcery can make her fly in the air or walk on water. But if you think about it, we are both doing the same thing. We are both defying the decree of Yama. What is different is the extent to which we do this.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘All that happens in this world has a cause. It is an expression of all that is recorded in Yama’s account book. Ideally, we should let things be. If a child is dying, it is meant to be. If a man has diarrhoea, we should let it be. If a woman has a headache, we should let it be. All this is meant to be. It has been ordained. But we don’t let things be. We want to change our fate. Heal wounds. Bring in health even if Yama says there should be disease. We challenge destiny every time we contact an astrologer, a geomancer, a doctor, a sorcerer. The astrologer manipulates time using stones to change destiny. The geomancer uses architectural modifications to change destiny. The doctor’s prescription manipulates the workings of the flesh and the mind to change destiny. The sorcerer changes the world itself through his magic and thus changes destiny.’

‘But a man’s body has no womb. How can a sorcerer make him pregnant? Men are not created to bear children. In which part of his body will a man keep the unborn child?’

‘My son. Anything is possible in this world. Even Somvat can become Somvati. I have seen it myself. Minerals, plants, animals and our bodies are ultimately bundles of matter and spirit. If you know the right formula, the right potions and the right diagrams, you can transform the proportion of matter and spirit, make a stone a plant, a plant an animal, an animal a human, a man a woman. That’s what a Siddha does.’

‘That’s unnatural.’

‘Some would call it a miracle. Careful of the word unnatural. It reeks of arrogance. You are assuming you know the boundaries of nature. You don’t. There is more to life than your eyes can see. More than you can ever imagine. Nature comes from the mind of God. It is infinite. The finite human mind can never fathom it in totality.’



The lump kept growing in size. Asanga kept visiting the palace. He was convinced the king was pregnant. But he did not know how to tell the queens.

‘Make sure the king is always happy. Give him all that he wants. Deny him nothing,’ he told the queens. He requested the palace bards to tell the king tales of heroes. Of the battles of the gods and demons, how Indra defeated the Asura, Vritra, with weapons made from the bones of Dadichi.

One day, he gathered the courage to ask Simantini, ‘What happened to the magic potion of Yaja and Upayaja?’

‘The sages destroyed it. We found the empty pot in the maha-sabha.’

‘I see.’

Before leaving he warned the queens, ‘Tomorrow night is full moon. A lunar eclipse. I suggest the king fast during that period and eat nothing. He should be kept indoors. His body should not be exposed to the moonlight. It may cause the lump to putrefy.’

‘You treat my husband as if he is pregnant,’ said Pulomi, sharp as ever.

Ever since the king had put his mother in her place and asserted his royal authority in court, Pulomi had felt her desire for her husband increase. She spent the days in the corner room dreaming of Yuvanashva ordering her around, forcing her to do his bidding. She felt the brush of his bristles. His grip. His bites. The impatient parting of her thighs. The forceful thrust. Her humble deference to his majesty. His groans of triumph. Her surrender and satisfaction.

But since the arrival of the lump, Yuvanashva did not care for sex. ‘I can barely keep my thighs together or keep my balance,’ he said when she came to him and offered the betel leaf.

‘But I am in season. We must unite. My body burns. You can lie in bed. I will do the rest.’

The king let her but his body refused to respond.

‘The lump is growing in size and stripping the king of all his virility. Do something quickly,’ Pulomi told Asanga. He was embarrassed by the queen’s forthrightness. Her hunger was evident.

One day the king told Keshini, ‘I have dreams. Strange dreams. Wonderful dreams. Of a child in a cradle. I go to him. He caresses my thigh. I tell him, “Grow up fast. Then we can talk and play and hunt all day long.” He laughs and

pulls my moustache. What does this mean, Keshini? Why are the gods tormenting me so?' Keshini did not know what to say.

CUT IT OUT



Then it moved. A kick. Then another. The king woke up with a start. 'Come here quickly. Feel this,' he called the ghosts. They saw the excitement in the king's eyes. They liked it.

The queens were called for. Simantini felt the lump which was now the size of a gourd. It had immobilized the king totally. It had been weeks since he had attended court. Simantini felt the kick. It made her feel happy. Then she was afraid. 'Send for Asanga,' she said.

Asanga felt the moving lump. There was no more doubt. How was he to tell this to the queens? Embarrassed, he decided to first inform Shilavati.

'What is wrong with my son?' she asked, looking the other way towards the lotus pond. A line of crows stood at the edge of her audience chamber where the sun stopped and the shade began.

'He is with child,' he replied. What else could he say? It sounded absurd. There was no way he could make his answer reasonable.

Shilavati did not know how to react. 'How can that be?' she asked without turning around, trying hard to be dismissive.

'I think your son accidentally drank the magic potion produced by Yaja and Upayaja. The potions of the Siddhas are powerful. They can have such effects.'

Shilavati got up immediately and rushed out of her audience chamber. The servants watched as the mother, who had kept to herself for many months now, walked briskly towards her son's chambers. Something was wrong, they told themselves. They had never seen Shilavati look so worried. What was wrong with the king?

Shilavati looked at her son lying in bed. He looked so helpless, sleeping with his legs spread apart. That lump making it impossible for him to sit or stand comfortably. The queens were around him. Comforting him. Fearing he was sick. Fearing that the boil might kill him. His vomiting, his retching, his huge appetite, his swollen legs over the past six months now made sense.

'Do they know?' asked Shilavati, softly, looking at her three daughters-in-law.

'No,' said Asanga, who walked behind her, his head bent.

Shilavati saw the nervousness of Simantini. Should she tell them that there was nothing to fear. What was growing in Yuvanashva's thigh would not kill him. Or would it?

'What if it is a monster? A parasite?' Shilavati asked.

'It could be, but I don't think so,' replied Asanga.

Shilavati imagined a huge tadpole with fangs sucking her son's blood and growing fatter by the moment. 'It could be some worm. Something that slipped into his blood when he was out hunting in the swamps.'

'No, my queen, it is a child. You can call the midwives and confirm this.'

'No, no midwives. I don't want anyone to know this.' Shilavati withdrew from the king's bedchamber and returned to her courtyard.

'The queens must be told,' said Asanga, following her in. He saw the crows were restless. They flapped their wings. Shilavati ignored them.

'Why?' asked Shilavati, sitting on the rug of black-buck. She pointed to the other blackbuck rug on the floor inviting Asanga to join her. A servant walked in with a reed fan. Shilavati raised her hand and indicated that she did not want to be disturbed.

'They need to know at least that the king is safe,' said Asanga. 'That there is nothing to fear from the lump. It is not a disease. It is a new life.'

'It is a disease. A child in a man's body. How do you explain this? It is an aberration, a disease, a curse.' Shilavati took a decision. 'Cut it out.'

'What?' said Asanga, not sure if he had heard correctly.

'Cut it out. Get the monster out of his body. Throw it into the river. Or bury it under a rock so that it does not haunt us.'

'Devi, it is a child we are talking about.'

'Women carry children in their bodies. Not men. What men carry can only be monsters. Kill it.'

THE SECRET REVEALED



The next day, the king was removed to the corner room of the women's quarters. The queens were told to leave him alone. 'No assistants. I will help you myself,' Shilavati told Asanga. 'I don't want anyone to know of this.'

'My queen, killing an unborn child is equal to killing a cow or a Brahmana,' said Asanga.

‘Don’t worry. It was my decision. My karma.’

‘That was not why I brought it up. My queen, do you realize you are asking me to kill your grandchild?’

‘It is not my grandchild. It is a monster who threatens everything I hold dear. I have to destroy it for the sake of my son.’

‘How so?’ asked Asanga, not sure what the queen meant. He felt suffocated. The inner room where the king had been moved had just one window. Lamps had to be lit to bring in light. The air in the room was still and stale. Incense had to be burnt to purify the space. The king was given a potion to sleep. Asanga saw the mats on the floor and the games of dice. He looked at the walls. All around images of women dancing, singing, laughing, seducing sages and flirting with each other. This was the secret space of the palace woman. He was perhaps the first man to see it.

‘If it is a child, as you say it is, then what will Yuvanashva be after he gives birth to it, that is if he survives the childbirth? A woman? A half-woman? What? Who will accept such a man as a king? It will be end of his kingship. And that child, a man born of a man. Everybody will consider it a monster. Nobody will accept him as a king. If this child survives, I will have a son and a grandson but Vallabhi will have no king. I cannot let that happen. Kill that thing in my son’s thigh. Do it, Asanga, or I will do it myself.’

Asanga hesitated. ‘Let me sit down and think.’ Asanga sat on the floor and leaned against a pillar. He covered his face. He was being asked by the queen to do something that was forbidden. Killing an unborn child is the most heinous of crimes. His father had told him how it had to be done. It involved inserting into the womb herbs that would force the baby out prematurely. The baby would shrivel, melt and ooze out as a clot. Matanga had warned him to use this knowledge with caution, and rarely, only when the unborn child is defective and if it threatens the well-being of the mother. To kill an unborn child is to deny an ancestor the chance to be reborn. But this was different. There was no womb to put herbs into. He would have to slice out the baby. Force it to breathe air before its lungs were fully formed. Basically, smother it with air.

Shilavati watched Asanga sitting against the wall, covering his face with his hands, breathing deeply. Shilavati wondered if the decision taken was right. It was. It had to be. For the good of her family and her kingdom. For the good of

her son. Why had this happened? What had she done wrong? she wondered. This calamity. This terrible accident.

And then doubts crept into Shilavati's heart. What if this was the only grandson she was destined to have? What if this was the child that the astrologers had foretold? What if the only way Yuvanashva could create a child was within himself and not in a woman's body? Maybe, the child should live.

'I will do it, Devi,' said Asanga standing up. 'But will you be able to assist me? There will be a lot of blood.'

There was a knock on the door. Asanga unbolted the latch and found the three queens outside. Simantini spoke up, 'Mother, I don't think the king should be left alone.'

'He is not alone. I am with him,' said Shilavati.

The women looked over the shoulders of Shilavati and Asanga. Yuvanashva was sleeping but it was apparent the sleep was disturbed. Simantini said, 'Mother, I know Asanga is here to remove that thing which is growing in his thigh. We would like to be with our husband when he is doing this. The pain will be unbearable.'

Keshini stood silently behind the two senior queens. She looked up. Her eyes met Asanga's. He looked afraid. Something was not right.

'Kshatriyas do not fear pain,' said Shilavati. 'My son is strong. He does not need the help of his wives to go through this mild operation. Don't worry, all will be well.'

'We have a say where our husband's life is concerned,' said Pulomi. 'If something happens to him, we will be widows. We will not leave his side. We will watch as the doctor removes the boil.'

'It's not a boil,' said Asanga.

'Quiet,' hissed Shilavati.

'Devi, the queens have a right to know,' said Asanga lowering his eyes.

'Right to know what?' asked Pulomi, raising her voice. Shilavati gave her second daughter-in-law a cold stare. Pulomi lowered her eyes. She feared Shilavati.

'That is no boil in your husband's inner thigh.'

Simantini sighed, 'I thought as much. It palpitates. It throbs. And the rhythm does not match the king's pulse. It moves like something alive. It is a parasite,

right?’ Simantini sounded like she was hoping against her deepest fears.

‘No, it is not a parasite,’ said Asanga. His throat felt dry. He gulped nervously and looked towards Shilavati.

‘It’s a child,’ said Shilavati. A tear rolled down her cheek as she said those words. A child. A child of the Turuvasus. She turned around. Through the window she could see the tamarind tree. The cradles on its branches tinkled in the wind as if protesting against her decision.

‘Finally, we admit the truth,’ said Pulomi, pushing her way into the corner room. ‘How long were we to continue this charade?’

THE OPERATION



Asanga covered the lump with a paste of turmeric. Then made an incision lengthwise with a sharp bronze knife. Blood oozed out. The bed was red in no time. He cut the layer of yellow tissue beneath. He dipped his hand in oil and pushed his fingers into the sides of the incision.

The queens watched keenly. Simantini placed the king’s head on her lap. Shilavati held his legs. Pulomi stood next to Asanga ready to offer him assistance. Keshini sat on the bed next to the king fanning him.

The king squirmed. ‘Pour some more of the potion in his mouth. He must sleep. If he awakens he will scream. The pain will be unbearable,’ said Asanga without looking up. He was negotiating his fingers around the ball of flesh located between the king’s skin and muscle. When he finally succeeded, he pulled it out. It was soft and wet and covered with slime. ‘There is an umbilical cord. Pull it, Keshini,’ he said.

Shilavati raised her eyebrows. The doctor had addressed the queen by her name. Such familiarity. Then her attention returned to her son. He was still. His feet were cold. ‘His limbs are limp.’

Keshini pulled out the cord. A small lotus-like placenta slipped out of the incision followed by a gush of dark red blood. ‘Quickly, hold this,’ said Asanga, handing the ball of flesh to Simantini. Simantini looked at it. It was a tiny ball of flesh. It moved. Her hands trembled. She screamed. ‘Don’t drop it. It’s alive,’ shouted Asanga. Simantini froze. Pulomi dropped the bronze knife Asanga had handed her. Keshini dropped the placenta. They all looked at what was in Simantini’s hands.

Asanga ignored the queens. Blood was pouring from the incision. With the help of Shilavati he raised the king's thigh and tied reams of medicated cloth round it like a tourniquet to stop the bleeding, bring the edges of the wound together and facilitate healing. He then put a layer of medicinal paste over the inner thigh.

He looked at what was in Simantini's hands. It was no parasite. It was a baby. A boy. With tiny hands and tiny feet and tiny eyes. And tiny lips. It started to cry.

Like a horde of wild trumpeting elephants the rain clouds rushed in above Vallabhi. There was thunder. Lightning. A downpour. The children ran screaming down the streets. Men and women extended their arms to feel the rain.

But in the corner room of the palace, the king lay asleep, naked, spreadeagled on a blood-stained bed. His wives were staring at the little baby in their arms. Small enough to fit in a single palm. Crying softly. Like a cat purring.

'The king consumed the potion six months ago. But that thing is fully formed,' said Asanga.

'It's a baby boy. Don't call it a thing,' said Simantini.

'I apologize, Devi,' said Asanga.

Shilavati stepped out of the room and returned a few minutes later with a pot of milk. Keshini said, 'Mother, the child cannot drink from a pot.'

'That is not for the baby to drink,' said Asanga. His face was grim. He knew what it was for. He wanted to protest. But he was too shaken to speak.

'Bring that thing here,' ordered Shilavati.

Simantini did not like her mother-in-law's tone of voice. 'Why?'

'Don't ask questions. Bring it here.'

'No. Not until you tell me,' said Simantini.

Shilavati was not used to being questioned. She looked up and stared. Simantini shivered. Pulomi understood what was happening. She had seen this in her father's palace, after her father's favourite concubine gave birth to a baby boy. 'The queen plans to drown the newborn in milk.'

Keshini let out a cry. Simantini drew back and held the baby close to her bosom. Outside, in the garden, hundreds of crows started cawing. Protesting.

The baby kept crying. 'It's a baby. For thirteen years the four of us have struggled to have a baby. And now you want to kill it. Have you no heart? What

kind of a woman are you?’ asked Simantini.

Shilavati strode towards her, ignoring her words, determined to snatch the baby. It had to be done. Cruel or unjust, it had to be done. What would people say? Her son was pregnant with child. She would be the butt of jokes across Ilavrita. ‘He could not make any woman pregnant so he got himself pregnant,’ they would say. She would not let them. This had to be done.

‘No, mother,’ said Pulomi, coming between Shilavati and Simantini. ‘You cannot do this. I will not let you. It’s a baby. It’s a life. You cannot do this.’

Keshini rushed and hugged Simantini, and covered the baby. ‘No, no, no, there has been too much death in this palace. Stop, mother. Stop.’

Shilavati stopped. She realized what she was about to do. A child. Born of a man. A monster. A freak. An aberration. Her grandson, nevertheless.

THE KING WAKES UP



The king awoke with a smile. He opened his eyes and found Asanga sitting next to him. ‘How long have I been asleep?’

‘The whole day, almost,’ said Asanga.

Yuvanashva looked outside the window. Water dripped from the leaves of the mango tree. ‘I feel light. Unburdened.’

‘We have removed the lump from your thigh.’

Yuvanashva saw the plasters round his thigh, the green and yellow paste of herbs. ‘I feel strangely content and fulfilled. I feel happy. I feel like crying. I cannot explain it.’ Asanga did not reply. ‘I feel a strange feeling in my heart. A longing, a yearning.’

‘I will tell the queens to join you,’ Asanga got up to call one of the servants.

Yuvanashva stopped him. ‘No, don’t. I cannot explain this. I feel as if my body is incomplete. It is crying out for fulfilment. My heart feels heavy. It beats slowly. As if tapping me to sleep. I feel a fullness in my chest. It is a strange feeling. A sweet suffering.’

Yuvanashva closed his eyes. He went back to sleep. Asanga left the room to check on the newborn.

The child would not stop crying. ‘It needs to suckle on a breast,’ said Simantini.

The three queens looked at each other. They felt useless.

Shilavati had given strict instructions that the child not be taken to Yuvanashva. 'It is not right. Keep them apart. They must not bond.' So the king was taken out of the corner room and moved to his section of the palace. The door of the woman's quarters was bolted shut. 'Let motherhood remain with the women,' said Shilavati.

The child kept crying. 'Tell the servant to fetch a wet nurse,' said Simantini. Pregnant women and nursing mothers avoided serving in the palace. They were afraid the unhappy glance of the barren queens would harm their child. So the servants had to go out into the city and look for nursing mothers.

They found six large-breasted women with a litter of children and ample milk in their bosoms. They placed the infant on their breasts. 'He is so small. Like a baby rat,' said one of the mothers, her smile full of affection. She touched the baby with her little finger tenderly. 'His skin is so thin. Even the veins below are visible.' But the baby refused to suckle. He just kept crying. The queens found it unbearable.

'He is a prince, all right. Clings to life tenaciously. And rejects the milk of commoners,' said Simantini softly.

'What can we do?' asked Pulomi.

The three queens and their handmaidens and the servants crowded around the little child. The walls leaned forward to hear him cry. The pillars wanted to hug him. The whole palace had been waiting for thirteen years to hear this sound of life.

'Devi,' said Shilavati's maid. 'The garden is full of wet crows. Hundreds of them. They are still and silent. They all look in the direction of the queen's quarters. It is eerie. Should I tell the guards to shoo them away?'

'No, don't,' said Shilavati.

The crying got louder and louder.

Yuvanashva woke up with a start. 'My baby,' he said.

Asanga, who had dozed off beside him, woke up too. 'What did you say, Arya?'

'My baby,' he said. 'You did not remove a lump from my thigh. You removed a baby. My baby. My son. I can feel him. Where is he?'

Asanga did not speak a word.

'Where is the baby?' demanded Yuvanashva.

Asanga lowered his head. Shilavati had given strict instructions not to say anything on the subject.

‘Where is the baby, Asanga? Tell me.’

Asanga looked at the king. Milk was oozing out of his chest. Yuvanashva followed the direction of Asanga’s eyes. ‘What is this?’ he asked. He wiped his chest with his hand and smelt the fluid. ‘It smells like milk.’ He tasted it. His eyes widened, ‘It is milk. Asanga, what is happening? Why is my body producing milk? It was a baby, was it not, Asanga, in my thigh? I felt it. I knew it. I just did not believe it. Where is it? Show me my child. Is it a boy or a girl?’

‘It’s a boy, Arya,’ Asanga confessed. ‘He is all right. He is safe with your mother and your wives in the women’s quarters.’

The cry reached his ears. ‘He is crying.’ Asanga could hear nothing.

‘I can feel it. I can hear it. Take me to him.’

‘Later, Arya. Your body has lost a lot of blood. You are drained of all energy. Your wound is still sore. Maybe tomorrow morning.’

The crying got louder. ‘No, now. Take me now,’ said Yuvanashva rising from his bed.

Asanga helped him up. Leaning on the doctor the king made his way to the courtyard of his wives.

The door was shut. One could hear the chattering of women inside. And the crying of a baby.

The guard announced the king, ‘The king is here. Open the door.’

The chattering of women stopped. No one replied. The child continued to cry.

The guard repeated, ‘The king is here. Open the door.’

Shilavati spoke from within, ‘Tell the king to go back to his bed. He is not well. The queens will come to him when he is better.’

The guard was about to speak. The king raised his hand and silenced him. ‘I come not for my wives. I come for my child. He is crying.’

After a long pause, Shilavati spoke, ‘There are women here who know what the child wants. They will calm him down. Go away, son. Let the women do what women know best.’

‘Then why is he crying?’ Yuvanashva felt his heart wrench. ‘He is miserable. He needs me. Let me see him. Please let me see him. I must see him.’

‘Go away, son. This is not for men.’

‘No,’ said Yuvanashva. ‘Bring him out. I must see him. I am his mother.’

There was silence. The baby continued to cry. Shilavati saw the look in the eyes of the servants and handmaidens. The shame. With a dismissive laugh she said, ‘He will say anything to see his son. Does he not know that after childbirth a woman is polluted? Fathers must see the child only after the thirteenth day.’

The servants and handmaidens nodded their heads in agreement.

The child kept crying. Shilavati told Simantini, ‘Take him inside. It took you thirteen years to produce this child. It should not take you thirteen years to nurse him.’

Simantini was taken by surprise. She looked at Shilavati. She had been declared mother by her mother-in-law. She lowered her eyes in obedience and started moving away from the door. ‘Please let me see my son,’ Yuvanashva cried from outside the door. ‘Please, please let me see my son. He cries for me.’

‘Don’t listen to him. He is delirious. The doctor’s potion has made him mad. He does not know what he is saying.’ The women started to follow Simantini. They all moved away from the door.

‘Bring him out now,’ Yuvanashva shouted from outside. ‘I, the king of Vallabhi, order you to do so.’

The women stopped in their tracks. They looked at Shilavati, then at the door. The order had been given. The king had spoken. He had to be obeyed.

The door was opened. The three queens stepped out. In Simantini’s hand was the little baby. Yuvanashva wept uncontrollably on seeing him. Simantini placed the child against the king’s chest. Instinctively, the child suckled the king.

‘I want him to be called Mandhata,’ said Yuvanashva. Mandhata meant ‘he who was nursed by me’.

Book Five



THE PRIESTESS OF BAHUGAMI



Long ago, before the other two wives came to the palace, Simantini had gone to the shrine of the goddess Bahugami located on the outskirts of Vallabhi. The priestesses of this goddess were men who lived their lives as women. They castrated themselves, offered their genitals to the goddess, wore women's clothes and adopted women's mannerisms. It was said that the blessings of Bahugami's priestesses always came true. They were known to bless childless couples. And so, on Simantini's request, Yuvanashva had accompanied her to the shrine of Bahugami in the second year of their marriage. On the way to the shrine, the bards who accompanied the royal couple told them the story of the goddess:

‘A handsome prince once rode into Bahugami's village on a great white horse and asked her father for her hand in marriage. Her father accepted the proposal and the prince took Bahugami to his palace on his horse. There she was welcomed by her husband's family: her father-in-law, her mother-in-law, her sister-in-law, her young brother-in-law and the many servants of the family. They blessed her and gave her many gifts. The wedding ceremony was a grand affair with a hundred priests invited to bless the newly-weds. Then came the wedding night. Bahugami sat in the bridal chamber dressed in her finest robes. She waited for her husband to open the door and raise her veil and embrace her

passionately. She waited and waited but the door did not open. He did not come. The night passed. At daybreak, she opened her window and found her husband in the courtyard below exercising his horse. She found that strange. The following night the same thing happened. She waited and waited. And he did not come. At daybreak she found him in the courtyard riding his horse. Days gave way to months and months to years. Every night she waited for her husband to come to her. He never did. But every morning he could be seen in the courtyard exercising his horse. Her mother-in-law who showered her with love at first slowly turned sour. "When are the children coming?" she asked. Too shy to tell the truth, she replied, "Soon." But the children would never come. Not until her husband came to her. But he never did. She tried to speak to him. But he refused to speak of it. When she broached the subject, he changed the topic. He laughed and joked and bought her gifts. A gold nose-ring. Silver anklets with bells. A finely woven sari all the way from Kashi. The sister-in-law said, "My brother loves his wife so much and she does not bother to give him a child. The wicked woman." The princess wept silently. She had no friends in her husband's house. Whom could she tell the truth? Who would believe her? "Maybe she is barren," said her mother-in-law. "Maybe we should send her back to her father like we did the first wife. It is time to get our son another wife. A fertile one." She was asked not to show her face at dawn at the well. "Yours is an inauspicious face," said the women. When she tried to play with the children, the mothers took the children away. "The touch of a barren woman can make children sick," they said. Tired by the taunts, unable to tell the truth, the princess decided to force her husband to come to her. After dinner, she followed her husband to the stables. "Go to your room. I shall come," he said. "Don't you believe me?" She did. She went to her room and waited and waited and waited. He did not come. The next evening she once again followed him. Once again he said, "Go to your room. I will come. Don't you believe me?" "I do," she replied. But this time she did not go to her room. She hid behind a pillar and watched what he was up to. She saw him mount his horse and ride out of the palace. She decided to follow him. But there was no other horse in the stable. How could she follow her husband? She looked around and found a rooster perched on the wall. "Can you serve as my mount and follow my husband?" "I will," said the rooster, "but you are too big and I am too small." The princess said, "If I have been faithful to my husband,

your size will increase and you will carry me with ease.” Sure enough, the gods who knew she was chaste and pure heard her prayers. The rooster increased in size and became big enough to carry the princess. He followed the trail of the prince’s great white horse. After a long journey, they came to a clearing in the woods. There stood the horse. Next to the horse she found her husband’s clothes in a pile. The princess looked around. She saw a pond. Its waters shimmered in the moonlight. Next to it was a woman. She was crying. “Why are you crying, sister?” asked the princess. The woman jumped up in surprise. The princess looked at the woman’s face and gasped. This was no woman. It was her husband dressed in a sari, complete with the sixteen love-charms of a married woman. “What is this?” she cried in disgust, “What are you doing? Why are you dressed as a woman?” The prince tried to run. She ran after him. “Tell me, what is this? Why are you dressed so? Why don’t you come to me at night? Why do you let everyone believe that I have not given you children?” The prince turned away, refusing to speak. “You owe me an explanation,” said the princess. “You ruined my life. Made me a barren woman when I am really a virgin. Tell me or I will tell the world your secret.” “You think the world does not know?” the prince retorted harshly, “You think my father does not know? You think my mother does not know? They know. They all do. They all know that I feel like a woman and that I only pretend to be a man.” “Are you not a man?” asked the princess. The prince shed his clothes. In the moonlight, the princess saw what she had never seen before. Her husband’s naked body. Broad shoulders, narrow hips, long lithe muscular limbs, covered with soft hair. And a manhood that rivalled a bull’s. She wanted to run her hand down his chest. “You are a man,” she said. “Come, make love to me, and all is forgiven.” “I can’t. I can’t,” he said. “My body is that of a man. But my heart is not. I think like a woman. I feel like a woman. That is the way it is. I have tried to change my mind. Spoken to Rishis and Yogis and Siddhas. But none have helped me. They tell me to accept reality. I can’t. I would like to be a man. Be your husband. But this cruel trick of fate prevents me.” The prince began to cry. Ashamed, he crouched like a child. Feeling sorry for him, the princess covered him with the sari. Then she was angry. “If you knew this, why did you marry me? Why did you marry before me? And your parents planned another marriage after me?” “What can I do?” said the husband. “They do not, they cannot, understand the truth about me.

They act out of love and in desperate hope.” “I can understand but I cannot forgive. What right do you have to ruin innocent lives. My life. The life of the woman who was your wife before me. And the life of the woman who would be your wife after me. I curse you. Should anyone like you dupe a woman they will never be able to cross the Vaitarni and enter the land of the dead. They will stay in the land of the living like Pisachas, wandering aimlessly forever like ghosts.” As she cursed her husband, the virgin princess-bride blazed like an inferno. She turned into a goddess. One whose fires remained unquenched. One who could never experience the joy of being a wife or mother. In her hand was a sharp sickle. With it she cut out her husband’s genitals. “You have no need for this,” she said. “You will never dupe women with this. You will serve me dressed as a woman. And only if you do that will you be allowed to cross the Vaitarni when you die.” Bahugami’s husband, dressed like a woman, became her priestess. And she started appearing in the dreams of all the men who were like the prince. She invited them to serve as her priestesses or accept her dreaded curse. Those who became priestesses were given the power to bless and curse. Whatever they said would come true.’

The priestesses of Bahugami blessed Simantini and Yuvanashva. They poured turmeric on the heads of the royal couple. The chief priestess, an old wrinkled man with a nose-ring made of silver, smeared their faces with vermilion. ‘Will we have a child?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘You will,’ said the chief priestess, looking at Yuvanashva with piercing eyes.

The other priestesses of Bahugami went into a trance. Waving branches of neem leaves, they kept repeating in shrill rasping voices, ‘He is fertile. Yes, he is fertile. Oh yes, he is fertile. The goddess smiles upon him. He is fertile and he will have a son.’

Simantini remembered the incident. The king did not give it much value but it troubled her greatly. She could not sleep for many nights after that. She did not understand it then. Now it all made sense.

While the palace was busy trying to make sense of Mandhata’s birth, Simantini slipped out and went to the shrine of Bahugami to ask the chief priestess, ‘Is my husband like you?’ The old priestess hugged the queen, made her sit on his lap and comforted her as a mother comforts a child. Simantini wept. ‘Please tell me, is he one of you?’

‘Does your husband desire you?’
‘Yes, he does. Very much.’
‘Does your husband desire his other wives?’
‘Yes, he does. He loves all of us in his own way.’
‘Then he is not one of us. We desire no women. Our flesh is that of a man but our hearts are that of a woman. Your husband’s heart is that of a man but his flesh seems to have turned into a woman’s.’

NARA AND NARAYANA



‘Has there ever been a man such as me?’ Yuvanashva asked Vipula.

Vipula could not answer. He did not want to answer. The whole incident disgusted him. And he was angry. Why was the king’s pregnancy kept a secret from him? ‘Rajan, do we have to talk about it? Let things be as they are. The answers you seek may not be pleasant. Their implications worse.’

But Yuvanashva could not let things be. He needed to know. Asanga understood. He visited the palace regularly, helping the king regain his strength. It was a while before Yuvanashva could walk. Longer still before he could attend court. Asanga told Yuvanashva, ‘Tell the bards to tell you story of Nara and Narayana who churned out a daughter from their thighs.’

The bards were called into the maha-sabha that night to entertain the king. Yuvanashva sat alone on the throne. Unseen by mortal eyes were two ghosts next to the king.

‘Two sages,’ sang the bards, ‘inseparable like the left and right half of a leaf, sat under the Badari tree determined to discover the truth that never changes. They shut their eyes and held back their senses. They did not eat. They did not breathe. They did not feel the termites gnaw into their flesh. Or the creepers grow round their arms. Nothing stimulated them. Nothing stirred them. The fire of life, which makes one react and respond, lay within them unspent. It transformed into the spiritual fire called tapa. Semen was its butter. The golden flames of this inner magical fire churned by these two Tapasvins made them glow scaring the gods because it had the power to invalidate them. Said Indra, king of the Devas, ‘Let us distract them. Make them shed this semen. Let us take away their glow.’ He instructed the lovely Apsaras to enchant the two men. They rose from the rivers and walked towards the Badari tree. First a dozen. Then

another. Rambha. Menaka. Ghrutachi. Their wet bodies gleamed like copper and bronze. Their loose wavy hair teased the eye covering one breast then the other. Each one knew how to seduce a Tapasvin. They had done it before. “We will draw the inner fire out and melt their unfeeling hearts,” they promised Indra. Nara and Narayana overheard this. In response they slapped their thigh. From it came a woman so beautiful that she seduced all the Apsaras and the Devas. “She is Uru-vashi, resident of our thighs. Our daughter. May she live with you, Indra, reminding you that in the realm of changing truths there always exists a greater pleasure. That is why no one is ever content in samsara. We seek moksha, liberation from samsara, a realm where nothing changes. To use your vulgar language, for you understand no other, we are residents of a realm that offers greater pleasure than the momentary orgasm that you seek. Let us be.”

‘What did Urvashi call the sages? Father or mother?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘We do not know,’ said the bards, puzzled by the king’s question. No one who had ever heard this story had asked this question. Why did it matter to the king?

The ghosts shared their views. ‘They may have created a child out of their thighs, father, but they were not like you. They were Rishis, determined to attain moksha. They would not allow themselves to be fettered by biological obligations or parental emotions. All they wanted was to teach Indra a lesson. Urvashi was but a tool.’

TWO CHILDREN OF ARUNI



A few days later, Yuvanashva once again summoned the bards. ‘Do you know any other story of a man who gave birth like a woman?’ he asked.

‘We know the story of Aruni,’ said the bards intrigued by the king’s interest in such a strange subject. They looked at each other but hid their smiles.

‘The dawn-god? That should be fun,’ said the ghosts.

‘It was the great festival before the rains when Apsaras dance naked in the presence of Indra, rousing him to hurl his thunder and cause the clouds to yield rain,’ said the bards. ‘No man, neither Manava nor Deva, was allowed to see this dance. But Aruni, the dawn-god, charioteer of the sun, was determined to see it. So he took the form of a woman and entered Indra’s court. Indra who had seen all the Apsaras before, did not recognize Aruni. He felt desire for her and chased her. Aruni could not give him the slip. He embraced her passionately and forced

Aruni to accept his seed. Aruni reported late for duty. The sun-god was livid. The day would start late for the horses had not been yoked. He demanded an explanation. The dawn-god revealed all. Curious, Surya asked Aruni to show him his feminine form. Aruni, not wanting to annoy Surya further, obeyed. Surya found Aruni's female form very alluring. Like Indra, he felt desire for her, and chased her. Aruni could not give him the slip. He embraced her passionately and forced Aruni to accept his seed. That day the sun rose late. For the dawn-god had to deliver two sons. One for Indra and one for Surya. Aruni gave them away to the childless Riksha, king of Kishkinda, lord of the monkeys.'

'Why did he do that?'

'Do what, Rajan?'

'Give the children away to monkeys.'

'We don't know, Rajan. Maybe children born of a man are fit only to be raised as monkeys,' said the bards.

Yuvanashva scowled. He did not like this ending. 'Go away,' he told the bards.

The bards realized they had said something to upset the king. They rushed out without waiting for an explanation or asking for a reward. They had heard of the new king's temper and did not want to be at the receiving end.

'He is no monkey,' said the ghosts sensing Yuvanashva's thoughts. 'He is a boy, your son, our brother.'

The ghosts disappeared. Yuvanashva looked out of the window. The night had ended. Dawn had pierced the eastern sky, turning it red. 'Aruni,' he asked, 'why did you give your children away? Were you ashamed of how they came to be?'

The dawn-god did not answer.

KING AS NURSEMAID



'Enough of these stories It will arouse curiosity. That's how gossip starts. Let things be as they are,' begged Simantini.

'I want to know who I am, Simantini,' said Yuvanashva.

'You are my husband. And we have a child. Leave it at that.'

In Hastina-puri, meanwhile, they were celebrating the birth of Parikshit, Arjuna's grandson. In Panchala, they were celebrating the birth of Amba, Drupada's granddaughter.

‘Nobody wants to celebrate your birth,’ said Yuvanashva, looking at Mandhata. He felt sad for the little one. The circumstances of his birth were hardly his fault. ‘They don’t know what to make of you. I don’t know what to make of you.’

No one in Vallabhi, except a few palace maids, knew of Mandhata’s birth. But they never talked about him. They never even looked in his direction. Something did not feel right. He had appeared so suddenly after the king’s illness. Had he been given to the king by the Devas? Was it created by the two Rishis? Had he been ploughed out of the earth through magical ceremonies invoking the Nagas? Why did Shilavati never go to him?

Yuvanashva did not care. All he wanted to do was gaze at the child all day long. He asked for a cradle to be placed in his chambers.

‘A cradle in the king’s chambers. What will people say?’ asked Simantini. ‘Besides you have to attend to the kingdom. Vallabhi needs its king. It is your dharma. Let the little one stay with me. I promise to be a good nurse.’

Yuvanashva agreed with great reluctance.

Eight times a day, the king would go into Simantini’s chambers. Simantini would pick up the child from the cradle and place him in the arms of the king. Father and son would sit on a pelt of black antelope. The windows would be shut. A lamp would be lit. In the light of the lamp, Yuvanashva would let his son draw milk from his chest.

Only once had Simantini peeped into the room and seen her husband nurse the prince. She saw Yuvanashva’s face fill with maternal tenderness. Tears in his eyes. Gentle sighs leaving his lips as he felt the milk ooze out his nipple.

Yuvanashva asked the barber to shave his chest. ‘Why, my lord?’ the barber had asked. ‘You are blessed with such a rich crop of hair.’ The king had not answered and the barber had obeyed. For the following year the king never bared his chest in public. He always wrapped his chest in an uttarya.

‘I don’t think I produce enough milk. The child looks thin. And I have no breasts. My chest is as firm as it has always been. Where does the milk store itself?’ Yuvanashva asked Simantini. He spoke freely in her presence. Simantini struggled hard to hide her awkwardness.

‘I will have the cook give you milk and bananas. Asanga says it is good for nursing mothers,’ she said.

When Yuvanashva was busy at court, he left his son with Simantini. When no one was looking, Simantini would offer her breast to the boy. He would suckle, and finding it dry, turn away and cry.

PULOMI LAUGHS



‘Now he has a womb and breasts. Why does he need wives? He is complete. All he needs, perhaps, is a husband,’ said Pulomi. She laughed. It was a bitter laugh.

News of Pulomi’s laughter reached Yuvanashva. He was not amused. Leaving Mandhata in Simantini’s care, he went to Pulomi.

Yuvanashva’s face was grim when he entered Pulomi’s chamber. The handmaidens sensed his anger. They prepared to leave. ‘Stay,’ said the king firmly. The women stopped and moved against the wall. Pulomi rose from her bed to greet the king. ‘Sit,’ he said pushing her down. ‘I heard you questioned my manliness.’

Pulomi was scared. She looked at her maids. They crowded in the corner, terrified of what could follow. ‘No, Arya, I would never do that.’

‘Maybe I am not a man. Maybe I am a woman. I have done what you could never do in the years of marriage.’

‘Please don’t say such things, Arya. They are listening,’ she said lowering her eyes, embarrassed. Her heart was beating faster. She regretted her laughter.

The king moved closer to her. He placed his hands on her shoulders, his hips close to her face. She could smell the milk.

‘Are you a woman, Pulomi? Hmmm...’ Pulomi felt like she was choking. From the corner of her eye she saw the servants watching this public humiliation. Oh, the shame. ‘My mother paid a lot for you. What a waste of cows! You could not make me a father. But can you make me a man?’ Pulomi turned away. ‘Look at me, when I speak to you,’ ordered Yuvanashva. Pulomi quivered and looked up. Tears rolled down her eyes. ‘I want you to show how much of a woman you are. Stoke my fire. Remind me I am a man. Your husband.’ He undid his dhoti. Pulomi saw her husband’s flaccid manhood in front of her eyes. She knew what he was asking her to do.

‘Arya, I am your wife. Don’t treat me like a whore.’ Yuvanashva’s eyes were cold. He took a step closer and put his hand on her head.

FINALLY



‘Devi,’ shouted Pulomi’s maid, running into Shilavati’s courtyard. ‘Devi. It has finally happened. My princess is pregnant. She is pregnant. She has not gone to the corner room for two moons. Asanga has felt her pulse. He has confirmed it. She is pregnant.’

Shilavati’s heart leapt with joy. She remembered what the astrologers had said. ‘Patience.’ The magic potion of the Siddhas had done more than make her son pregnant. The magic had seeped into his seed.

She got up and rushed to Pulomi’s room leaving her prayers midway. ‘So my son has been going back to his wives,’ Shilavati checked with the handmaiden.

‘Only once,’ she said. ‘Two moons ago.’ She ran ahead. She did not want to recount or remember what she had witnessed. But then, such things happen between husband and wife. Everything happens for the best. She was happy for her queen.

A woman with life within her body is Prakriti, nature itself. She is a goddess. She needs to be worshipped. Especially when she is the wife of the king.

Shilavati organized a great ceremony to celebrate Pulomi’s pregnancy. All the wives of the Kshatriya and Brahmana and Vaishya and Shudra elders gathered in the queen’s courtyard dressed in their finest. The courtyard was lined with flowers. The women came bearing gifts for the queen. ‘Finally, the doorway has opened,’ said one woman. ‘The ancestors will be pleased.’

A lone crow watched the crowd from one of the roofs.

A rich floral pattern had been created with rice flour in the centre of the courtyard. Pulomi was made to sit in the centre. The women showered flowers on her and walked around her with lamps in their hands. ‘Know that you are a diminutive double of the goddess. Life grows within you,’ they chanted. They gave her gifts to make her happy. Because happy mothers produce happy children.

Food was cooked. All the women watched Pulomi eat. ‘Eat something sweet, then something sour, then something spicy, then something salty and finally something bitter. You must taste all five flavours. It helps the child.’

They put talismans on her arms to protect mother and child.

The women brought with them pots of sprouted grain. ‘You are the earth. Fertile. Fecund. You nurture. You provide,’ the women sang.

The king was called into the women's courtyard. Pulomi was made to sit on his lap. She avoided his eye. Everybody thought she was shy. Yuvanashva kept a stony face. It was the first time they had met since the night he had humiliated her. Yuvanashva justified his actions as necessary to put his wife in place. He was king after all. He felt Pulomi cringe when he put his arm over her shoulder. Pulomi had scrubbed her body for days trying to remove her sense of violation. But then the seed he had left in her womb had sprouted. She felt pure again. But she could not forgive the king.

The women gave Yuvanashva a blade of grass that was dipped in the sap of the banyan tree. 'Put two drops in her right nostril,' an elderly Kshatriya woman instructed the king. Turning to Pulomi she said, 'Try not to sneeze. The sap will ensure that the child being moulded in your womb is a boy. This kingdom needs an heir.'

But the kingdom has an heir, thought Yuvanashva. He realized none of the women knew of Mandhata. He resisted the urge to tell them. 'Beware of the implications,' Vipula had said.

There was great rejoicing in the city. Shilavati ordered the streets to be watered. New flags fluttered on rooftops. Sweets were distributed on the streets.

Yuvanashva realized how the arrival of the child had transformed the city and the palace. Such ceremonies celebrating the queen's pregnancy would be held every month till the day of childbirth. There were no celebrations when Mandhata was conceived. Everybody assumed it was a disease.

Keshini had prepared a basket of gifts for Pulomi. 'Why are you doing that?' asked Simantini.

'For the ceremony,' replied Keshini.

'My dear, you and I are not invited.'

'Why?'

'Because we are barren.'

'But we are friends,' argued Keshini. She had spent hours consoling Pulomi when she learnt how Yuvanashva had treated her. She had stopped her from cursing the king because a wife who curses her husband curses herself.

'Did she ever come to you after her pregnancy was confirmed?' asked Simantini. Keshini realized she had not. 'We were all bound by barrenness. But

that bond is broken now. Now she will rule the women's courtyard. Mother of the king's true son.' Simantini felt her jealous outburst choke all her sensibilities.

Keshini looked at the basket of gifts she had prepared and remarked, 'She thought the king had violated her. But in fact he ended up giving her what she desired most. The ways of Yama are mysterious indeed.'

'How do we know it is the king's child?' asked Simantini. Keshini's jaw dropped. How could Simantini say such a thing? Keshini felt jealousy gnawing its way into Simantini's heart.

Palace gossip reached Pulomi's ears. She did not react. She merely felt the child kick in her womb and smiled.

THE ACCIDENT



Women poured into the palace to see the mother-to-be. They came with gifts and lots of advice. 'Milk, lots of milk, to make the child strong and fair.' 'And clarified butter to loosen the joints and lubricate the orifices, to make the delivery smooth.' 'No sour and bitter and spicy food. No tambula. Can cause the womb to contract and harm the child.' 'Churn butter and use the stone mill to grind flour. That is a chore for all mothers, even a queen. It keeps your spine supple, makes childbirth easy.'

'And no sex,' said Shilavati, who knew how much Pulomi enjoyed her son's company. Pulomi smiled as she was expected to. Shilavati noticed the smile did not extend to her eyes. The spies had told her many things about how the child came to be. She brushed them aside. 'And be careful when you bathe.'

The bathhouse floor was scrubbed by the servants to remove all trace of moss and slime. This was the favourite place of the palace women. A place where they could indulge themselves. They spent hours anointing themselves with oils and unguents, then washing it away with warm water. The room was full of pots of various sizes and filled with the fragrance of many herbs. Pulomi especially enjoyed bathing there. She had six servants to help her. One only to manage her hair. One to massage her body. One to scrub her skin. One to pour the water. Two to help her dry and dress.

Pulomi always bathed with at least one of the other queens. Mostly Keshini who could talk without a pause on any subject. But now she felt that only women who were mothers should be around her. So neither Keshini nor

Simantini was invited to the bath. And only four of her six maids accompanied her. When she was done, Shilavati would come to her rooms followed by maids who carried a pot of sweet milk and a basket of fruits. Pulomi would sleep with her head on her mother-in-law's lap all afternoon, feeling loved and secure.

In the seventh month of her pregnancy, as Pulomi was leaving the bathhouse she slipped and fell. 'I was pushed,' she insisted.

Shilavati was frantic. Asanga was called. But the baby was safe.

Shilavati saw fear in her daughter-in-law's eyes. 'What is it, child?' she asked, placing her arms around her.

Pulomi snuggled closer to Shilavati and replied, 'He does not want this child. It is only half his.'

BIRTH OF JAYANTA



Less than a year after Mandhata's birth, palace maids could be seen running through the maze of courtyards that made up the palace of Vallabhi untying all the knots they could find. Knots on clothes, knots on tapestries and curtains and ropes. The royal washerman was told to open all the bundles of clothes. The Brahmanas were told to untie the threads that kept the palm leaf manuscripts together. The queen was delivering and knots in the vicinity could hinder the childbirth.

It was evening when the pain started and night when Pulomi's water broke. The palace was well prepared. For over a month, two of Vallabhi's best midwives, one Shudra woman and one Kshatriya woman, were told to stay in the palace in anticipation of the childbirth. They placed their hands on the queen's stomach and felt the quickening of the womb to distinguish true labour from false. 'Not yet, but soon,' they kept saying every time the pain came. This went on all night long. Over a dozen palace women participated in the royal childbirth.

It was a great spectacle. The queen reclined on a seat of gold. She was being fanned with yak-tail fly whisks in anticipation that a male child would emerge from her womb. Pulomi was naked except for her gold anklets, armlets, necklace and nose-ring. Her hair was unbound. Servants kept wiping the sweat that covered her body as she writhed in pain. Pulomi insisted that Shilavati sit beside

her. ‘Hold my hand, mother,’ she said. The pain frightened her. She squeezed Shilavati’s finger’s hard everytime the pain intensified.

At the crack of dawn, the midwives announced it was time. Pulomi was made to stand. The midwives stood on either side. They held her by the waist and asked her to put her arms over their shoulders. Shilavati stood behind rubbing Pulomi’s back and shoulders, comforting her. ‘Push,’ the midwives shouted.

Shilavati expected her daughter-in-law to scream in agony. She gestured to the maids to get the neem twig that Pulomi could bite into. But before the twig was brought, the midwives said, ‘It’s a boy. It’s a boy.’ The child had slipped out with the first push.

The excited maids blew the conch-shells. Hearing which the palace guards began to beat the drums and the priests of Ileshwara began to clang the bell. Soon the whole city of Vallabhi was resounding with the sound of bells, drums and conch-shells and the cawing of crows. Everyone was excited. Shilavati had her grandson. The Turuvasu flame burnt bright.

‘He shall be called Jayanta, son of Indra, king of the gods,’ said Shilavati. Pulomi could not believe it was over so soon. The child was placed in her arms. Tears rolled down as she saw his tiny lips and tiny arms. She turned and looked at her mother-in-law. Shilavati was crying too. All the women were crying. Tears of joy, they all agreed. The women gathered around and sang a song to celebrate the childbirth and bless mother and son. ‘Green is the earth. Green is Gauri. Green is the mother. Rich in milk and rich in sap. Green is the earth indeed.’

END OF CONFINEMENT



After the childbirth, the mother was asked to rest. ‘She is inauspicious now. Full of foul blood. It will be a month before she is purified. Until then she must rest and no man must see her. Not even the father,’ said the midwives.

Singers were called to entertain mother and child while Pulomi was in confinement. She spent her time allowing herself to be massaged, fed and bathed. They tied a long cloth tightly round her stomach to prevent it from sagging. They burnt cow dung cakes beneath her bed to help her uterus contract. Pulomi loved the attention. More than that she loved it when the nursemaids brought little Jayanta to her for feeding.

Yuvanashva did not come to see Pulomi or his son. He stayed in Simantini's chambers feeding Mandhata, ignoring the chatter of women that came from the courtyard outside. Simantini sat next to him, fanning him, no longer awkward at the sight of a man nursing a baby, angry at being excluded from the celebrations outside.

Mandhata had almost been weaned. Simantini enjoyed feeding the child his first meal of rice boiled in milk. Had Mandhata been born of a woman, this annaprasanna samskara would have been a great ceremony held in the mahasabha with the child sitting on the lap of his royal father. But it was conducted privately in her chamber with only Keshini and Asanga as witness.

No nursemaids were appointed to massage Mandhata. 'I will manage,' said Simantini. She realized this baby was no different from the others she had seen in her father's palace.

A month passed. Pulomi was healthy and pure. She was ready to present herself and her child to the city of Vallabhi. The day was fixed. The palace was decorated. A great silver seat shaped like a turtle with silver cushions and images of cows on the back rest was placed in the far end of the women's courtyard. Women of all four varnas were told to come to the palace with their sons and daughters through the elephant gate. A royal feast had been organized. Shilavati ordered forty different varieties of vegetables, fruits, cereals and grain to be cooked.

The women and children came with gifts for the prince. Toys, rattles, silver boxes with lamp black, tiny anklets and armlets, talismans with images of gods and goddesses.

Simantini asked Yuvanashva, 'Will you be attending the ceremony?'

'It is only for women,' Yuvanashva replied, all attention on his son.

'It is for mothers.'

Yuvanashva looked up at Simantini. 'Are you trying to tell me something?'

'The people will assume that Jayanta is your first born. Is that fair to Mandhata?'

'We know the truth.'

'People see what they are shown. We must present Mandhata.'

'How do we explain his birth and this secrecy?'

‘We can say that we kept his birth secret to protect him from Pisachas who prevented you from fathering a child for thirteen years. And it was the condition of the Siddhas that after the child is born it should be isolated for at least a year. Otherwise the Pisachas would suck its life out.’

‘You have a very powerful imagination, Simantini.’

‘I have been thinking about it for some time.’

‘Have you also thought of a way to explain of how it was I, not any one of you, who came to bear the first prince?’ asked Yuvanashva sarcastically.

Simantini took no notice of this. ‘There is no need for that. I will present Mandhata. I am his mother too.’

‘Since when?’ asked Yuvanashva sharply.

‘Since the day Pandu claimed to be the father of the Pandavas without making either of his wives pregnant. If a man is a father of his wives’ children through the rite of marriage, why can I not be the mother of my husband’s child through the rite of marriage? Surely motherhood is kindled in the heart too?’ she told Yuvanashva. ‘I may not be Mandhata’s mother by blood or milk. But I am his mother by love. When Krishna visited my father’s palace, my father asked him what surprised him most about life. Krishna answered, “That everyone asks me to choose between my birth mother Devaki and my foster mother Yashoda. I tell them, why choose. Everyone who loves me as a child is my mother.” I love Mandhata as my son. I am therefore his mother.’

Yuvanashva handed over his son to Simantini, his first wife, Mandhata’s mother by love. ‘Now you will be the mother of the king’s firstborn,’ he said reading her mind. ‘You will bow to no one.’

MANDHATA IS PRESENTED



The queen’s courtyard was full of women. Wives of Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Mothers belonging to communities of priests, soldiers, farmers, herdsmen, weavers, potters, painters and dancers. They played flutes, drums and symbols and clapped their hands singing cheerful songs to celebrate the birth of Jayanta.

Pulomi sat on green cushions on the silver throne. Next to her sat Shilavati and the wives of Rishis who had come all the way from the forests to bless her.

In front of her spread on a reed mat were the gifts for her child. Each piece created with love and affection by the potters and silversmiths of Vallabhi.

Pulomi sat with Jayanta in her arms beaming with pride when suddenly, without warning, the conch-shell trumpets of the king sounded.

The singing stopped. The music stopped. Everybody turned to look at who was coming. Was it the king?

‘No, it is not him,’ said Shilavati realizing what was going through Pulomi’s mind.

Pulomi heaved a sigh of relief when she saw it was Simantini. Then she was angry: she did not want the glance of a barren woman on her son. That was when she noticed what Simantini held in her arms. She froze.

Draped in a green sari, wearing a gold nose-ring, a long garland of champaka flowers reaching up to her knees, in regal gait, flanked by maids who carried the king’s yak-tail fly whisks and silver parasol, Simantini cradled Mandhata in her arms. ‘This is the king’s firstborn. My son. We present him to you,’ she announced.

All the women gasped and broke into an excited chatter. Shilavati kept an impassive face hiding her irritation. Pulomi looked at her son trying hard to hide her shock.

The women looked at each other. Finally, the wife of a Kshatirya elder asked, ‘Why have we not been told of this?’

‘For the safety of the prince. He was born after great difficulty as you all know,’ said Simantini, smiling confidently, not taking her eyes off Mandhata even for a moment.

The women understood. They had all seen their king visit the shrine of Ileshwara every full moon for thirteen years dressed in white begging the deity for a child. They had all seen the three queens dressed in red visit the shrine with garlands of jabakusuma flowers on new moon nights. They were the first to see the face of the deity. The last to receive her grace. ‘Ileshwari has given the king not one but two children. A torrent instead of a trickle of grace. Praise be to Ileshwari,’ said Keshini, who stood behind Simantini.

‘Praise be to Ileshwari,’ shouted the women.

Shilavati watched as the women who were sitting around her second daughter-in-law got up and crowded around her elder daughter-in-law. They looked at the

young Mandhata. He was dressed in a white cloth with tiny gold anklets and armlets and a chain of gold beads with tiger claws round his neck. He yawned and looked content in Simantini's arms. The women started to sing. 'Blessed is the queen. Blessed is our prince. Blessed is Vallabhi.'

Pulomi and her son were all but forgotten.

Simantini smiled in triumph.

Book Six



BHANGASHVANA



Just before the rains, at the height of summer, the image of Ileshwara was brought out of the temple and placed on a giant pedestal in the city square. Yuvanashva led his elephants out of the royal stable, each one ornamented with golden headgear and a plume of peacock feathers. They surrounded the sacred pedestal and on instructions of the king, raised their trunk to spray cool sandalwood water on the deity. ‘May the elephants turn into clouds. May the sandal water be rain. May the waters pour on earth as they did on you,’ sang the three queens.

The image was then returned to the temple. The king stayed back and sat on the pedestal, replacing the deity. His three wives sat behind him. He held his two sons on his lap. Jayanta had started to crawl and Mandhata was able to mumble a few words. Both were fast asleep.

It was the first time that all members of the royal family presented themselves to the public. It was a great occasion. The Brahmanas welcomed them blowing conch-shell trumpets and waving oil lamps around them. The Vaishyas showered them with grains of freshly husked rice mixed with turmeric. The Shudras brought pots of water which were poured into the extended palms of the king

and queens. The king and the three queens drank this water. And the priests said, 'This will bring the rains.'

Yuvanashva's mind was occupied by the two little ones in his arms. He looked at Jayanta. He will call me 'father', as he should. Then he looked at Mandhata. What should this one call me? Father or mother?

After the festivities, he summoned the bards. 'Is there anyone in the scriptures who had children who called him father and children who called him mother?' he asked.

'There was one Bhangashvana,' they said.

'Tell me his story.'

'We don't remember this story. Only Bhishma knows it,' they said.

But Bhishma was dead. Weeks after the Pandava victory, he had finally succumbed to the arrows shot by Arjuna from behind Shikhandi on the tenth day of the war. 'Who will now tell me the story of Bhangashvana?' wondered Yuvanashva.

'Maybe the Pandavas know the story,' said the bards. 'They have heard much of what the old man had to say.'

For days after the war ended, the Pandavas did not leave Kuru-kshetra. They sat around Bhishma nursing his wounds, waiting for him to die. As he lay on a bed made of arrows, Bhishma had a lot to say. He spoke on politics and economics and history and geography and science and philosophy. He spoke on the nature of time, space and dharma. He spoke on how people should behave. Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras. Men, women, children. Hermits, householders. He had an opinion on everything. A story for all queries. Yudhishtira listened to all that the old man had to say. This was the wisdom of his forefathers. Unlike cows, and horses, and elephants, and women and gold and land and kingdom and crowns, it would not outlive death. Yudhishtira had asked Bhishma many questions. One of them was, 'Who gets more pleasure in life: man or woman, son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother?' Bhishma replied that he did not know. All he knew was the opinion of a person called Bhangashvana who lived half his life as a man, a son, a husband and a father and the other half as a woman, a daughter, a wife and a mother.

Yuvanashva was interested to know Bhangashvana's opinion. Royal pride, however, prevented Yuvanashva from going to Hastina-puri and talking to

Yudhishtira.

He will wonder why I am interested in that particular story.

He may not want to share his inherited wisdom.

He may refuse to entertain the request of a king who stayed away from the war.

As the days passed the restlessness intensified. He started to believe that in the story of Bhangashvana he would find that which would calm his restless heart.

What sounds sweeter, father or mother?

THE ASHWAMEDHA YAGNA



Perhaps because Yuvanashva refused to go to the Pandavas, the Devas decided to make the Pandavas come to Yuvanashva. Kama planted in Yudhishtira's mind the desire to perform the Ashwamedha yagna.

The royal horse of the Pandavas, white as snow, named Uccaishrava, was sent out of Hastina-puri to wander across the countryside, through forests and fields, along the banks of the Ganga and the Yamuna, to claim all the lands for the Pandavas that it passed through unchallenged. Yudhishtira's warriors ran behind the horse, holding up his banner with the symbol of the moon, carrying bows and axes and swords and lances, with Arjuna as their leader. Who dared challenge the Pandavas? There were no more kings in Ila-vrita. Except in Vallabhi.

When the horse reached the gates of Vallabhi, Yuvanashva caught the horse by its rein and refused to let it pass. Never before had this happened in Vallabhi. The people cheered their great king. 'This is what happens when you have a man as king,' they said.

'You challenge the Pandavas,' shouted Arjuna.

'Yes,' said Yuvanashva. Vipula, who stood beside Yuvanashva, was proud of his friend. So different from his mother who submitted her dignity for the sake of prosperity.

'Then be ready for war,' said Arjuna, raising his bow.

'Are you not tired of war? Of killing brothers and fathers and uncles and friends.'

'What do you know of war?'

Yuvanashva winced, then said, 'I know it kills sons, does not bring peace, makes mothers weep and curse endlessly, fills victors with guilt and misery. Let us not fight Arjuna. Your horse shall pass through Vallabhi. But only if you tell me a story.'

Vipula could not believe the words of the king. A story! Was that what Vallabhi was worth? He had misjudged his friend. Weakened by motherhood no doubt.

'What story do you seek?' asked Arjuna surprised by this strange request.

'The story of Bhangashvana.'

'Bhangashvana? Who is Bhangashvana?'

'Don't you know? I was told Bhishma narrated this story to the Pandavas before he died.'

'I am sorry but I remember no such story. He said so many things.'

Yuvanashva's face fell. 'I waited for days for this horse to reach my gates. I so wanted to hear this story.'

'Why does this story matter so much?' asked Arjuna.

'It just does.'

'Some stories are not meant to be remembered,' said Arjuna, 'Let it go.'

Yuvanashva felt that Arjuna knew the story but did not want to share it. What was so terrible about it? He chose not to pursue the matter.

The Pandava army was getting restless. They raised their weapons. Arjuna knew he could force his way through Vallabhi. No one, least of all this weakling of a king, could stop him. 'Let me pass, Yuvanashva. I don't know the story. Don't force me to raise my bow.'

Vipula heard a sneer. He felt the Pandava soldiers laughing at his friend. How dare they? He decided to take matters into his own hands, put the arrogant Arjuna in place. 'Maybe you can tell my king something else before he lets you pass, O son of Kunti,' said Vipula bowing low. 'Something that you will certainly remember.'

Yuvanashva looked at Vipula intrigued.

'What?' asked Arjuna tapping his fingers impatiently on the shaft of his mighty bow.

'Is it true that you spent the thirteenth year of your exile disguised as a woman?' asked Vipula. Arjuna cringed at the question. Yuvanashva looked at

Vipula and thanked him silently for that timely intervention. ‘It is true, is it not? You hid yourself in the dancing hall of Matsya and taught the princess to dance. My king wishes to know everything that happened there. Everything. Even that which you have not shared with your brothers, or your wife.’

‘Vallabhi is not worth it,’ said Arjuna, drawing his bow.

Yuvanashva held the horse’s rein more firmly. Tension rose.

‘Are you so afraid of the truth, Arjuna,’ said Vipula, coming between Arjuna and his king, knowing that Arjuna would not raise arms against a Brahmana, ‘that you would rather kill than speak? This is such a small request. A story for the submission of the most prosperous kingdom in Ila-vrita.’

Arjuna lowered his bow. He alighted from his chariot and came close to Yuvanashva, pushing Vipula away. ‘Please don’t ask me to remember that year,’ he pleaded. Yuvanashva saw the misery in his eyes.

‘Was it so terrible to be a woman?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘No. It is terrible to *appear* as a woman and still have a man’s heart,’ Arjuna replied. He looked around sheepishly and then said softly, ‘I will tell you all. But only you. Who knows? It may help me unburden my soul.’

BRIHANALLA



Yuvanashva led Arjuna through the gates of Vallabhi towards the palace. With a gesture he stopped Vipula and others from following them. Vipula stood at the gate not letting either Yudhishtira’s horse or the Kshatriyas of Hastina-puri pass. He did not like being excluded but understood this was the price of wounding Kshatriya pride.

‘Come to the maha-sabha,’ said Yuvanashva. He looked at the sun. It would be hours before it set and the two ghosts would appear. ‘No one will disturb us there.’

They sat on two blackbuck skins spread out before the turtle throne. Arjuna spoke with a faraway look in his eyes, ‘To be a woman is like becoming a prey, her every move watched by hungry predators. Every glance of man is a violation. No one is spared. No one. Not mother, not sister, not daughter. It is only fear of dharma that keeps men in check.’

‘How can you say such a things about men when you are one yourself?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘You have to see a man’s eye through a woman’s body. Then you will see a different truth. A truth that few men are prepared to acknowledge. Take away dharma and man is a beast. Ready to pounce on any woman. Even a false woman such as me.’

‘A false woman?’

‘A woman without a womb. You see, I dressed as a woman, but I still had a man’s body. All except my manhood.’

‘What happened to it?’

Arjuna looked around, lowered his voice and said, ‘Urvashi took it away from me for a year.’

‘Urvashi? How so?’ Yuvanashva was intrigued. He remembered the tale of the irresistible nymph created by Nara and Narayana who enchanted even Indra. He had heard the Pandavas had interacted with many strange spirits during their exile in the forest. Was Urvashi one of them?

‘I met her when the Devas took me to Amravati. She asked me to make love to her. I refused.’

‘You refused Urvashi!’ Yuvanashva was about to laugh but he checked himself when he realized Arjuna was not amused by his reaction.

‘I was very attracted to her. She was so beautiful. But I was restrained by dharma. You see, she was the wife of my ancestor, Pururava. I descend from her son, Nahusha. She is like my mother. How can I make love to my mother even though she looked younger than Draupadi, hardly an ancestor? But my mind knew that time moves differently for Apsaras and Manavas. She told me that the rules of man do not apply to nymphs. She could go to any man she pleased. But I reminded her that I was a man, a mortal man, a descendent of Prithu and Ila and Pururava, and that the rules of man applied to me. I would not make love to the mother of my forefathers, even if I wanted to. She said that she had been struck by Kama’s arrow and that her body burned with desire. She insisted that her needs mattered more. But I was restrained by the rule-book of Yama. Enraged, she looked less like an Apsara with welcoming lips and more like a scorned Matrika with fangs and bloodshot eyes. She caught my genitals and wrenched it away. ‘He who does not come to a welcoming woman does not need his genitals,’ she said. I screamed in agony. Begged her to understand. She laughed.

I fell at her feet. In mercy she promised to restore my manhood after I spent a year dressed as a woman.'

'Like the priestesses of Bahugami,' said Yuvanashva.

'No, not like them,' said Arjuna, annoyed by the analogy. 'I did not have a manhood but I *still* desired women.'

'What kind of a man shares his wife with his brothers?' asked Yuvanashva mischievously.

'One who obeys his mother,' said Arjuna. Yuvanashva smirked. Arjuna sensed the slight to his masculinity and did not appreciate it at all. 'I have many wives, king of Vallabhi, many more than you,' he said squaring his shoulders, 'Drupada's daughter is my wife. Krishna's sister is my wife. Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur, bore me a son. I made Pramila, the dark and swarthy warrior princess, my wife following the way of the Pisachas; when she rejected my advances I used magic to make myself a serpent and slip under her robes as she slept. I have so many wives that I don't remember all their names. All these women bore me children, each and every one of them. Tell me Yuvanashva, how many children have your wives borne you?'

'Two,' lied Yuvanashva. He offered Arjuna some tambula. Arjuna politely declined. He wanted to be done with this conversation and take his horse through this wretched kingdom.

'Did behaving like a woman make you less of a man?' asked Yuvanashva.

Arjuna smiled. 'It was fun when Draupadi draped the sari around me. My chest was still wide and my arms covered with scars of battle. She painted my eyes and lips and tied my hair. The thirteenth year of our exile, when we had to lose our identities, and live in disguise, was to be the most humiliating year but the masquerade made it all fun. Twelve moons of make-believe. Yudhishtira presented himself as a Brahmana well versed in matters of dharma who in exchange for his advice sought shelter and knowledge in the game of dice in which Virata was an expert. Draupadi served as the queen's maid. Bhima was the cook in the palace kitchens. Nakula took care of the royal horses. Sahadeva the royal cows. I offered to teach song and dance to the princess. The king of Matsya, Virata, said, "You look like a man but you dress as a woman. Let my courtesans confirm you are a eunuch." So the courtesans came. Beautiful

women. I let them undress me. Confirm there was nothing between my legs. Nothing that would interest a woman or a man.'

'The greatest archer in Arya-varta living as a woman. How did it feel?'

'Liberating actually. I could get away with anything. I could cry and dance and sing as I pleased. I had to answer to no woman or man. I was no one's husband or wife. But, Kama did not leave me in peace.'

'What happened?'

'The king had twins. A son and a daughter. Uttara and Uttari. I was employed to teach the girl song and dance. I spent all day with her in the dancing hall showing her how to move her fingers, her wrists, her legs and her head in response to the rhythm of the music. Her brother liked to watch his sister dance. He wanted to dance too but his father forbade it. "Dancing is for girls," he said.'

'Who taught you to dance?'

'Krishna ...

'Then one day, a mad dog entered the palace and made its way into the dancing hall. Uttari screamed. The dog chased her barking, yellow froth pouring out of its mouth. I knew it would bite if I did not act fast. The guard was useless. As scared as the princess. I grabbed the guard's bow and arrow, and shot the dog dead before the eye could blink. The speed with which I acted attracted a lot of attention. The prince saw this and said, "You are as good as Arjuna, I am sure." I had to think fast and come up with a suitable lie. I told him that I knew Arjuna. I had met him in Manipur when he was courting Chitrangada. We had become friends. I had taught him to dance. He had taught me to use the bow. The story satisfied Uttara. "Teach me what Arjuna taught you. Teach me dancing too," said the prince. His sister joined me, "Me too. Me too. Teach me to use the bow." "Archery is not for girls," Uttara told his sister. But Uttari was determined to have her way. "If you don't want me to tell father that you want to learn to dance like a girl, you will let me learn to use the bow," she said. My heart went out to both of them. They were like my children. My students. They reminded me of all my children. Draupadi's son, Subhadra's son, Pramila's son.'

'You said, Kama did not leave you in peace. What happened?'

'At first, I saw the children as children. But they were hardly children. Virata was preparing for both their weddings. He wanted to sell his daughter and use the cows to buy a wife for his son. He was an apology of a Kshatriya. More fit to

be a trader. While the king was busy negotiating the price of his daughter, I taught both brother and sister to dance and to use the bow. Spring gave way to summer. Then came the rains. When the monsoon clouds departed, Kama arrived gliding on the autumn moonlight. He struck me with his arrow. I noticed Uttari's body as she danced. Round. Firm. Supple. Her expressions were perfect. She beckoned an imaginary lover. I thought she beckoned me. My heart fluttered. I realized, though stripped of manhood, I possessed the heart of a man. To Uttara and Uttari, however, I was a woman. They were both too young to know what a eunuch was. Yes, my gait was exaggerated. My speech pretentious. I was more woman than any woman they knew. I did not shy away from the stares of men. When they made comments, I took them as compliments. No, I was no palace maid who ran away. I was no modest queen who walked softly, with head bent and eyes lowered. I dressed as a woman but strutted like a peacock. I enjoyed flirting with the men, teasing them, making a fool of them. When the men tried to get too familiar, I would grab their testicles and squeeze them so hard that they begged for mercy. But the taunts continued from afar. They offered to kiss me. At first I was revolted but then I enjoyed the attention. The young prince noticed all this. He saw I was fun to be with. He spent all day and all night with me like a puppy. At first it was endearing but then I realized he was following me because he was in love.' Arjuna shook his head and smiled. 'The situation was hopeless. Brother chasing me. Me chasing sister. A doomed love triangle.'

'You were man and woman at the same time. A man for Uttari and a woman for Uttara,' said Yuvanashva thoughtfully.

'I was neither. I was a eunuch. False man. False woman. I was relieved when the year ended and my manhood was restored. I saw the heartbroken Uttara. "I cannot stop loving you just because your body has changed," he said. "My love is true, unfettered by flesh." I laughed scornfully. "Grow up," I said, hoping to hurt him, break his heart, make him forget me, find a true woman and make her his wife. I had to forget Uttari too. Virata was upset when he learnt my true identity. He feared that his daughter's price in the marriage market would be compromised, having stayed the year with Arjuna, the womanizer. But the ever-alert trader found a better solution. "Marry her," he said. I saw the greed in his eyes. He wanted an alliance with the great Kuru clan. I wanted to accept the

offer. But I did not. I loved the little girl and could have made her my wife but she looked upon me as teacher, mother, friend, protector and parent. My year as a eunuch had made me acutely aware of the dark thoughts of man. I refused to marry her. I let dharma decide. She saw me as a father. I made her my daughter-in-law.'

IRAVAN



Arjuna prepared to leave. He had said enough. Yuvanashva, however, could not resist one more question. 'Did you ever feel like a woman? A wife? A mother?'

'No never.'

'Do you know of any man who would have experienced a woman's emotions?'

'Krishna perhaps.' Arjuna then told Yuvanashva the story of Iravan, known only to the Pandavas. 'Sanjaya who saw the whole war with his mind's eye and narrated all to my blind uncle Dhritarashtra did not see this. It was done in secret.'

Long ago, Arjuna had met a Naga princess called Uloopi. He was bathing in the Ganga when she came from below, swimming like an eel, and dragged him under. He tried to come up but she kept pulling him down till he fainted. When he awoke, he found himself naked on her bed. She lay beside him. 'Beautiful Pandava, make love to me, make me your wife.' Arjuna refused. 'You cannot refuse me. Don't you know the price of refusing a willing woman in season.' Arjuna protested. He did not love her. He did not care for her. 'I love you. I want to be the mother of your child,' she said. 'Give me your seed, Arya. Don't deny me that. It is against dharma to turn away from me. An ancestor stands on the threshold of Vaitarni right at this moment. Don't disappoint him.'

Arjuna made love to Uloopi and then left her bed. Soon she was forgotten, like yesterday's meal.

On the eve of the Kuru-kshetra war a young warrior presented himself to the Pandavas. 'I am the son of Arjuna, born of Uloopi,' he said. 'My name is Iravan. Let me fight with you.'

Arjuna was not sure. Krishna said, 'You have seven armies. The Kauravas have eleven. You need as many warriors as you can get. Acknowledge him as

your son, even if you don't remember his mother. Hug him. Bind him. Don't let him go.'

Arjuna hugged Iravan. Iravan felt so happy to finally meet his father that he fought furiously.

For eight days, the war continued with no end in sight. Both the Pandavas and the Kauravas were equally matched. Everybody turned to Sahadeva. He never spoke unless spoken to. He answered only what he was asked. 'How must we win this war?' they asked.

Sahadeva looked at the stars and said, 'We must offer Kali the blood of a perfect man so that, satiated, she will force Yama to rewrite his books in our favour.'

'Human sacrifice?' Yudhishtira did not like the idea.

'You must agree,' said Bhima. 'Blood has to flow. Either in the battlefield or in the sacrificial altar.'

'How do we find the perfect man?' asked Yudhishtira.

'He will have thirty-six sacred marks on his body,' said Sahadeva. Everyone looked around. They found not one but three. Krishna, Arjuna and Iravan.

The Pandavas said, 'We cannot sacrifice Krishna, he is our guide. We cannot sacrifice Arjuna, he is our best archer. That leaves us with Iravan. Let us sacrifice him.' Arjuna nodded his assent.

Iravan realized his father did not love him as he loved his father. No one in the battlefield really cared for him. He mattered only because he had thirty-six marks on his body. Krishna felt his pain. But the sacrifice had to be done. 'We can only sacrifice you if you are willing.'

'I am willing. I want to be remembered as a hero who sacrificed himself for his father.'

Arjuna felt guilty. But there was no turning back. 'Do you have a last wish?' asked Krishna.

'Nobody here cares for me. My mother told me not to go. She told me it would be so. She told me if I died, only she would cry. I defied her. Told her there would be others who love me. I want that to happen. I want someone to cry for me. A widow. Who beats her chest and unbinds her hair and rolls in mud in my memory. Who breaks her bangles to mourn for me. Give me a wife Krishna. Tell the Pandavas to find me a wife.'

‘No woman will marry a man doomed to die at daybreak. A bride of a night and a widow for eternity. Who will seal their daughter’s fate thus? Not all fathers are like Ahuka. Not all daughters are like Shilavati,’ said Bhima.

Krishna knew this was true. But the war had to be won. The boy had to be sacrificed. And he had to go to the altar willingly. ‘Cover your eyes, cousins,’ he said, ‘Let me do tonight what must be done. Few will understand this. Fewer still will accept this. A temple needs to be built in memory of this event. For no society will ever enshrine it.’

Krishna then became a woman. A perfect woman. Mohini, the enchantress. She became Iravan’s bride. She approached him bearing the sixteen love-charms of marriage. He put the sacred thread dipped in turmeric round her neck. He put vermilion powder in the parting of her hair. They took seven steps together around the sacred fire. Then they were taken to a tent. The bridal chamber on the battlefield. Through a tear in the tent, Iravan showed her the Arundhati star. She gave him betel nut and milk. They talked. She laughed. He felt loved. They spent all night in bliss.

The next day, Iravan was stripped of all his clothes, covered with neem leaves, smeared with turmeric and led to the altar. Sahadeva sang the hymns. Nakula lit the lamps. Yudhishtira offered flowers to the goddess. Bhima raised the axe. ‘One stroke, it must be. Just one. He must die instantly. No pain. No suffering. No curse,’ instructed Arjuna. The axe swung. The head rolled. Mohini wept as a widow should.

Arjuna told Yuvanashva, ‘We never spoke of that night ever again. But it was the only time I had seen Krishna cry. I have seen many widows cry. But none like Krishna.’

THE FEVER-GODDESS



The royal horse of the Pandavas galloped through Vallabhi, followed by Arjuna and his army. Vallabhi accepted Yudhishtira as its overlord. Yuvanashva did not care. What bothered him was that his question remained unanswered. Arjuna knew what it was to be woman. Krishna knew what it was to be a wife. But neither knew what it was to be a mother.

That summer, a fever swept through Vallabhi. The skin of every child that clung to a mother’s breast became red with rash. Their bodies became hot.

Asanga said, 'Nothing can be done to remove this fever. Just wash the warm limbs with cool sandal water and rub the rashes with neem.' It was the curse of the fever-goddess.

Both Mandhata and Jayanta were ill. They were irritable and kept crying. They could not sleep and they spat out whatever they ate. The whole palace was worried. 'They must make offerings to the fever-goddess,' said Shilavati.

The shrine of the fever-goddess stood outside the city, next to a lake under a neem tree. She sat on the shoulders of Jvara, a three headed, six-armed, three-legged, demon. Once she was married to a merchant. A king accused him of theft and had him killed. Deprived of the joy of marriage and maternity, she swore to sweep into the king's city unless he appeased her with sacrifices. She made her presence felt through fever. She threatened babies. To appease her, women gave her gifts of bridal finery. They offered her lemons and sour curds. This calmed her down. She let the fever pass.

All the women of the palace made their way to the shrine of the fever-goddess. Simantini and Pulomi walked with them. One had to go to the shrine barefoot to demonstrate one's sorrow and desperation. 'There is no need for you to join,' said Simantini to Keshini, 'Watch over the two children while we are away.'

By the time the queens returned, Jayanta's fever had abated. Mandhata's fever, however, had worsened. 'I am worried,' said Simantini. Keshini said, 'Maybe I should have gone to the temple too.'

'Go, quickly,' said Simantini but when Keshini returned Mandhata's body was still hot. Delirium was setting in. 'Mother, mother,' he mumbled.

'I am here,' said Simantini. She could not bear to see the boy suffer. 'Get the king,' she told Keshini, who had already ordered the servant to fetch the doctor.

Asanga came and found Mandhata in Yuvanashva's arms. He was limp. 'Do something,' said the king, an anguished look in his eyes. Asanga looked at the child. He was very weak. All he could do is reassure. Such fevers could not be healed.

'Have you made an offering to the fever-goddess?' asked Asanga.

'We have. Lemons. Curds,' said Simantini. 'All three of us and all the palace maids. Jayanta responded immediately. Mandhata is still weak.'

'Did Yuvanashva make the offering?' he asked.

‘No.’

‘Maybe you should,’ said Asanga, avoiding the king’s eye. ‘The goddess accepts only the offerings of she who has given life.’

Pulomi got up and walked away. Keshini looked at Asanga angrily. Simantini did not take her eyes off Mandhata. ‘I will go,’ said Yuvanashva.

‘Only women can go to the shrine,’ said Simantini without looking up, embarrassed by this conversation. ‘We have to wear green saris and sixteen love-charms of marriage. Earrings, toe-rings, nose-rings. We must offer the same to her in a wicker basket along with lemons and curd. How can the king go like that? What will people say?’

Yuvanashva said nothing. He hugged the child and closed his eyes. Asanga looked at the two queens. There were worried expressions on their faces. They cared for the little one. And they looked embarrassed. How does one get used to such a situation?

Late that night when the whole city was asleep, Yuvanashva slipped out of the palace unnoticed through the serpent gate carrying a bundle of cloth. ‘Where are you going?’ asked the two Pisachas, following him.

‘To the shrine of the fever-goddess.’

‘But men are not allowed there. The goddess will not like it.’

The king did not reply. When he could see the neem tree near the lake, he stopped and untied the bundle he was carrying. It contained a sari. Yuvanashva removed his dhoti and uttarya and draped the sari. ‘What are you doing?’ asked the Pisachas. The king did not stop to answer. He opened a box containing many ornaments and went on to put the toe-ring, the anklet and armlet. He even put on a nose-ring, wincing as he forcibly and hurriedly pierced the left lobe of his nose. He pulled out a chain of large silver coins and tied it round his neck. In a silver box shaped like a leaf was lamp black. He lined his eyes with it. He tied his hair with a string of flowers. The bundle also contained a small wicker basket filled with gifts for the goddess, prepared by Keshini and Simantini: six lemons, a small pot of curd and a lamp with clarified butter and a cotton wick. He went to the shrine of the fever-goddess and made the offering.

In the light of the lamp, the large silver eyes of the goddess stared at this mother with a moustache. Her two hands blessed the king.

Back in Vallabhi, Mandhata started breathing normally. He broke into a sweat. His fever abated.

‘Don’t go, mother,’ said Mandhata, grabbing Yuvanashva’s arm when he returned. The child’s eyes were squeezed shut. They were wet with tears.

‘I won’t go anywhere, little one’ said Yuvanashva. He picked the boy up and placed him on his chest. He was still wearing the green sari he had worn to the fever-goddess shrine. He was wet with perspiration after the long walk. It was a miracle that no guard noticed him. Or did they? Had they turned away? Did the palace know what the king was doing?

The sound of Yuvanashva’s heart, the rhythm of his breath, comforted Mandhata. He relaxed. He slept all night on Yuvanashva’s chest, clinging to him as a monkey clings to his mother.

This was the first time Yuvanashva had heard Mandhata call him mother.

Just before dawn, Simantini picked up Mandhata and took him to her bed. Mandhata snuggled between her breasts. ‘Father’s moustache tickles,’ he said. Then he yawned and went to sleep.

That day, as they went to the Kshatriya section of the city on the royal chariot, Yuvanashva told Vipula, ‘It will not make sense to your logical mind. You will say, a parent is a parent, whether you are father or mother. But it is not the same. I cannot explain. You have to experience it. I don’t know what Bhishma told Yudhishtira. And I don’t know what Bhangashvana’s opinion was in this matter. All I know is what I feel. I feel, while there is sweetness when your son calls you “father”, there is more sweetness when he calls you “mother.”’

MOTHER OR KING?



Yuvanashva told Simantini of his decision, ‘Henceforth, Mandhata will call me “mother.”’

‘How can he call you mother? Let him call you what Jayanta calls you. How does it matter anyway?’ Simantini said.

It mattered. Yuvanashva could not explain what he was going through. When Jayanta called him ‘father’ it felt right. But when Mandhata called him ‘father’ it felt wrong. ‘What’s wrong if he calls me mother?’ he asked.

‘It would be inappropriate,’ said Simantini.

‘At least in the palace.’

‘No, the servants will hear. Tongues will wag.’

‘I can’t bear it,’ said Yuvanashva. ‘Let him call me mother.’

Simantini grew tired. It was time to bring out the one argument that would stop this nonsense. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Choose. What would you rather be—king or mother?’

‘What?’

‘King or mother?’

‘I am king. I am also mother.’

‘No. Mothers cannot be kings. If Shilavati cannot be king, Yuvanashva cannot be mother.’

Yuvanashva was silent.

‘My lord, what use is a wife if she cannot be mother. Let me be what I was brought here for. Your son’s mother. I will love him as my own. You stay king.’

‘He is mine. I gave birth to him. You are nothing,’ said Yuvanashva angrily.

Simantini struck back. She had thought about this long and hard. She spoke with confidence, ‘To be a mother you must be a woman. Are you saying you are a woman, Arya? If you are a woman you have no right to sit on the throne.’

Yuvanashva said, ‘I will not let you take my son away from me.’

‘Either your son or your crown. Choose what you wish to give up.’

‘I can see you have been talking to my mother. She has made you a pawn in her game to get back at me.’

‘She is right.’

‘She is vicious and vindictive. She is using you.’

Simantini felt sorry for her husband. Her voice softened, ‘It is for your own good, Arya, that I do this. And for the good of our family. The world must not know that you are an aberration. They will cast you into the same pyre into which you cast those two boys. I will not let them do that to you. Let the world see you as it wants to see you. A great king, with three wives and two sons. Virile and strong and obedient. The flame of the Turuvasu clan. Be a father. Leave motherhood to me. I am your wife. Your chief queen. You owe me that.’

He did.

‘And this scar? Do you want to deny the truth of this scar?’ asked Yuvanashva, parting his dhoti, revealing the gash of childbirth on his left inner thigh.

‘Everybody knows what that is,’ said Simantini, turning away, with Mandhata in her arms. ‘A hunting accident, where you were gored by a great boar’s tusks.’

Outside, the crows cheered. What a brilliant lie! Order had been restored. The family tree was in full bloom. Its honour intact.

Book Seven



NO ONE TURNS UP



Sixteen years after the carnage of Kuru-kshetra, a young girl in the city of Panchala felt blood seeping between her thighs for the first time in her life.

‘Devi,’ cried her handmaiden addressing the girl’s mother, ‘It has finally happened. The princess has bloomed.’

Hiranyavarni, the widow queen of Panchala, heaved a sigh of relief: it was three years overdue. Turning to Soudamini, her now toothless mother-in-law, she said, ‘Now, no one will doubt your son’s masculinity. The forefathers will welcome my husband into the land of the dead.’

The girl’s name was Amba. Born ten moons after the battle of Kuru-kshetra, three moons after Mandhata, she was the last of the Yagnasenis, daughter of Drupada’s eldest son, Shikhandi.

A messenger rushed to Hastina-puri whose king, Yudhishtira, had served as Panchala’s guardian since Drupada and his sons met with their death in Kurukshetra. ‘The daughter is a true woman,’ he said. ‘So the father must have been a man.’

Draupadi, who had never doubted this, wept on receiving the news. ‘If only he was alive to hear this.’ she told Yudhishtira.

A flood of memories gushed into the palace of the Pandavas. The dreadful dawn following the night of victory, the headless bodies of Draupadi's two brothers and her five sons, and Ashwatthama, son of Drona, laughing hysterically, holding their seven heads, describing in gory detail how he slipped into the Pandava camp at night, and slit the throats of all the warriors as they slept, breaking every code of decency.

'What decency are you talking about,' Ashwatthama had barked when the Pandavas finally caught up with him. 'You broke each and every rule of war in order to secure victory. Where was decency when Yudhishtira lied to my father, told him I was dead, breaking his heart and making him throw down his weapons? My father killed Drupada fairly, in keeping with the rules of battle, but Drupada's son struck him down after he had laid down his weapons. He was unarmed, Yudhishtira, and yet you let Dhristadhyumna chop his head off. Was that appropriate? Was that dharma? I don't regret killing Dhristadhyumna as he slept. I wanted to kill the five of you too but I killed your sons instead. That was a mistake. I regret that. They were children, the youngest barely sixteen. I also regret killing Shikhandi. She was a woman after all.'

'Cut his tongue out, Arya,' Draupadi had screamed. 'Is it not enough that he killed my brother? Now he calls him a woman. Insults him even in death. Cut his tongue out, break his bones, throw him to the dogs.'

Realizing there was still an opportunity to make Draupadi cry, the vengeful Ashwatthama had retorted, 'Shikhandi was a woman. So what if Krishna took him into the battlefield. Even Bhishma lowered his bow out of decency. Your father, you, your husbands, can pretend as much as you want. But that does not change facts. Your perverted father got her married to a woman. Such adharma. He deserved to die. In fact, now that I think of it, I don't think killing Shikhandi was wrong. To kill a woman who pretends to be a man is dharma indeed.'

Yudhishtira had wanted to rip Ashwatthama's tongue out himself. But he had restrained himself. 'Forgive him,' he had said. 'That will be his worst punishment. He wants to die. So he provokes us. But let us not give him that satisfaction. Let him suffer the memories of his crimes for the rest of his life. Wherever he goes, people will say, "There goes the son of Drona, a Brahmana, who gave up his varna to become king. There goes the son of Drona, child-killer, woman-killer."'

Years had not healed the deep wounds of that night. Wiping her tears, Draupadi told her husbands, ‘I want my niece’s swayamvara to be the grandest in Ila-vrita.’

How could Yudhishtira say no? It had made his wife smile. No expense was therefore spared. Emissaries were sent to each and every kingdom along the banks of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, inviting worthy kings and princes to Panchala so that Amba could select a Gandharva from amongst them.

It had been a long time since Panchala had seen a royal wedding. The whole city came alive, like the red earth in summer yearning for the rain. The palace walls were painted with bright images of nymphs, gods and sages. The streets were watered. Flags were hoisted atop every house. Gates were decorated with flower garlands. Musicians and dancers and storytellers were invited to entertain the guests. Pavilions were set up on the many roads that led to the city where the royal entourages could rest and where their horses and elephants and cows could be watered. Yudhishtira personally oversaw all the arrangements to the satisfaction of Draupadi and to the relief of Hiranyavarni.

Young Kshatriya boys climbed the topmost beam of the city gates eager to identify the arriving princes by their fluttering banners. They waited, and waited, and waited. Days passed. The flowers withered and the roads dried up. But not a single banner could be spotted. For not a single prince in all of Ila-vrita had accepted the invitation to Amba’s swayamvara.

MANDHATA REJECTS AMBA



Mandhata too had received an invitation. He too had turned it down.

A spitting image of Yuvanashva, Mandhata was as handsome as his father had been when he was sixteen, with broad shoulders, slim waist, long muscular arms and thick long hair reaching down to his waist. His eyes were as piercing and his lips as full. In the hermitage of his teacher, when he moved around wearing nothing but a loin cloth, his brown body covered with sweat glistened like polished bronze in the sunlight. And when he entered the river one could almost hear the Apsaras gasp.

Vipula had informed Yuvanashva that the young prince was ready to step out of brahmacharya-ashrama and step into grihastha-ashrama. Yuvanashva was sure

that if his son went to Panchala, he would surely become Amba's Gandharva. Mandhata's decision not to go took him by surprise.

'Why did you not go?' asked Yuvanashva.

'Because she is Shikhandi's daughter,' replied Mandhata.

'So?'

'How can anybody accept as his bride a woman whose father was a woman?'

'So says the man whose mother is a man,' cackled the two ghosts that night.

Yuvanashva defended his son, 'He does not know his truth.'

'Then tell him.'

'No.'

'How dare you let him self-righteously reject that poor girl? Is that the kind of king you want for Vallabhi? It is time, father. Let the truth be told!' screeched the ghosts, rising up into the air.

'No, it is not time,' said the king looking away.

'When then?'

'When society is ready to accept the truth.'

'When will that be?' asked the ghosts. Yuvanashva did not reply. The ghosts sensed he was frightened. 'What is it, father?' they asked, their tone no longer accusative.

'I am afraid.'

'Of what?'

'Of being rejected by my son.'

'Do not underestimate the power of man, father,' said the two Pisachas in a compassionate voice, 'Look at Amba. All the men of Ila-vrita have rejected her. Yet that slip of a girl faces her rejection stoically. She has not broken down. And she does not hide from the truth. She will surely make a worthy daughter-in-law, a worthy wife and a worthy queen. But your son? Will he face the truth? Will he make a worthy husband, a worthy king?'

THE TRUTH OF AMBA



Truth can terrify. But there are many who face truth fearlessly. Like the little boy, who, when asked about his father, replied, 'My mother says that she has served many men. So she does not know of which seed I am fruit. All she can say with certainty is she is my mother and that I am her son. Her name is Jabala

and that makes me Jabali, the son of Jabala.’ Impressed by the little boy’s forthrightness, his teacher gave him a new name: Satya-kama, he who fearlessly yearns for the truth.

Hiranyavarni, who had heard this tale in her father’s house, had sworn she would be like Satya-kama and always face truth fearlessly. That is why, on her wedding night, forty-five years earlier, she was not afraid to tell Panchala what it had been denying for fourteen years. That its crown prince, Shikhandi, to whom she was given as wife, was a woman.

Only her father, the king of Dasharna, had heard her then. He had sent his chief concubine to check if this was true. But when she had returned with a smile on her lips shouting, ‘He is most certainly a man. And what a man!’ he had no choice but to send her back to Panchala shamefaced.

No one had greeted her at the gates of the palace when she returned. ‘How dare she show her face here,’ her mother-in-law had shouted.

‘Where else will she go?’ Shikhandi had shouted back, holding her hand firmly. ‘She is my wife and she belongs here, beside me.’

Tears had welled up in Hiranyavarni’s eyes as she felt her husband’s comforting grip. But the truth had not changed. She had seen what she had seen. And no matter what the courtesan had experienced, her husband was for her a woman.

‘How did you get it?’ She had asked her husband when she had finally found the courage.

‘From a Yaksha,’ he had said.

‘So what I saw was true, was it not, Arya?’ she had asked.

And he had replied, ‘That was yesterday’s truth, Bharya. This is today’s truth.’

‘Truth cannot change,’ she had insisted.

‘It has. Look at me,’ he had said, untying his dhoti. She had covered her eyes in embarrassment. ‘It is real. It works. I will prove it to you.’ When she had resisted, he had dragged a palace maid to their bed and mounted her in plain sight. The helpless maid had submitted to the prince but had shut her eyes in shame. But with each thrust her eyes had grown wider. By the time he was done, she was clinging to him fiercely, and shamelessly, refusing to let go, mouthing pleasurable sighs. ‘See, how this girl smiles,’ he had said. ‘That is how your

father's courtesan smiled. She also clung to me, begged me to make love to her once again, said she could not bear the itch.'

Hiranyavarni had found the whole thing revolting, 'You should stick to courtesans and palace maids then. And take more wives if you wish. But I will not come to you. My truth remains my truth. And a Yaksha's manhood will not make a wife out of me.'

And so, in public, Hiranyavarni was always seen seated demurely beside Shikhandi, fulfilling her social obligations as a wife but in private she never let Shikhandi touch her. If he came to her courtyard, she let him in. She was the dutiful wife who bathed her husband, fed him, even let him sleep on her bed, but she never offered him tambula and he never forced himself on her. He loved her for leading him to his truth. She loved him for accepting her truth. But a shared truth stretched between them, keeping them apart.

The Yaksha's manhood had brought with it dreams, terrible dreams that made Shikhandi talk in his sleep and weep and sweat all night. He dreamt of being a woman, of being abducted on the eve of her wedding, of being forced to marry an impotent prince, of begging that she be allowed to go back to the man she loved, of being allowed to do so only to have her lover turn her away. For nights on end Hiranyavarni watched her husband writhe in agony feeling that woman's pain, her rejection, her humiliation.

Hiranyavarni had sought the help of the priestesses of Bahugami, who were known for their oracular powers. They had recognized in Shikhandi's dreams a painful memory of a past life. Waving branches of the neem tree and swaying in a trance, the priestesses had told Hiranyavarni, 'That woman who haunts your husband is Amba, once eldest daughter of the king of Kashi, who was in love with Shalva, who was abducted by Bhishma of the Kuru clan, and who was given in marriage to Vichitra-virya. She immolated herself after all of these men rejected her. Shikhandi is Amba reborn, born to kill Bhishma, cause of her misfortune.'

'I am no woman reborn,' Shikhandi had protested. He was determined nothing would come in the way of his new-found masculinity. Many women threw themselves at him drawn by the potency of the Yaksha's appendage. He never turned them away, partly to make his wife jealous, partly to prove to himself that he was indeed a man and partly to convince his father that he was really a son.

Unfortunately, Drupada was not convinced. He had also heard what the priestesses of Bahugami had to say. ‘This is not the son I wanted. He is a woman at heart.’ So saying he invited the Siddhas, Yaja and Upayaja, to perform a yagna and give him a true son— an event that only fuelled Shikhandi’s sense of inadequacy. When he saw the twins, Dhristadhyumna and Draupadi, emerge from the fire-pit, he had told Hiranyavarni, ‘Bharya, my brother is more man than I will ever be and my sister is more woman than I could ever be. My father found me fit enough to have a wife but will he find me fit enough to wear the crown?’

The humiliation was complete when Shikhandi was not allowed to ride out with the Yagnaseni Kshatriyas to Kuru-kshetra. Dhristadhyumna was made commander of the Pandava army while Shikhandi was told by his father to stay back and guard the women of Panchala as if he was a eunuch.

But on the ninth night of the war, Dhristadhyumna had returned to fetch him. ‘Brother, they want you to ride into battle on Krishna’s chariot tomorrow morning.’

‘Why? Is Arjuna dead?’ Shikhandi had asked, surprised by the offer.

‘No, no. Arjuna will ride on the chariot with you. Behind you.’

‘Why?’

‘The Pandava morale hangs by a thread. Old Bhishma has proved to be an able commander for the Kauravas. He has held his ground and pushed the Pandavas back for nine days. He has smashed all my battle formations. To win, we must first be rid of Bhishma. And the only way to do so is to make him lower his bow. But he will do so only in front of a woman. As women are not allowed to enter the battlefield ...’

‘... you want me to ride in on Krishna’s chariot,’ Shikhandi had completed the sentence with a bitter smile. ‘A man who is actually a woman!’

Dhristadhyumna had felt his brother’s rage and humiliation. Falling at his brother’s feet, he had said, ‘Forgive us, brother. We are only human, imperfect creatures, limited by our prejudices. But in Krishna’s eyes you are a man—not what you were born as, but what you have become.’

‘I have become a man of convenience with a weapon called womanhood,’ said Shikhandi. But he did not argue further. This was perhaps his only chance to

fight like a man, and perhaps die like a man. Besides, Krishna had sent for him. How could he say no?

As he was about to put on his armour, Hiranyavarni had said, 'I have one wish.'

'What is it?'

'Make love to me before you go. Let me be your real wife. Otherwise I will never be able to walk by your side in your next life.'

Shikhandi had touched his wife's cheek tenderly. 'Do you think I will die?'

'I think nothing will survive this war. If you survive this war, I will put on gold anklets like a queen and sit beside you on the throne. If you don't, I will shave my head and beat my breast as a Kshatriya's widow should.'

'Are you sure you want me to make love to you? You know what happens to women after that.'

'The itch that will follow will be the only memory I will have of you. It will remind me constantly of your manliness that I have rejected since my wedding night.'

Hiranyavarni led Shikhandi to her courtyard. After thirty years of being together, they finally consummated their marriage. Shikhandi was slow and generous in his affection. As he penetrated her, he looked into the shadows and wondered if the Yaksha was watching, impatient to take back his manhood.

He was.

But Sthunakarna's manhood did not leave Shikhandi. It clung to him till the day he died. And it left behind no itch. Instead, Hiranyavarni's withered womb bloomed with life.

Hiranyavarni remembered the shocked expression on her mother-in-law's face, just days after the war, when she announced she was with child. 'How is it possible?' Soudamini had asked.

'He was a man, was he not, mother?' Hiranyavarni had replied. 'It is his. I assure you. He came to me before he left for war.'

'I know my son was a man. But you stopped bleeding months ago.'

'He was so much of a man, mother, that his seed did not need a fertile soil.' That silenced Soudamini and all others in the palace. Perhaps in many ways it broke Soudamini's heart. The world had finally taken away her daughter and replaced her with a son.

Amba was born ten moons later and when she was twelve years old, Hiranyavarni told her everything about her father. She had a right to know. Amba accepted the truth fearlessly like Satya-kama.

‘Why did you name me Amba?’ she once asked her mother.

‘It was the one name your father uttered more than mine,’ replied Hiranyavarni honestly.

Mother and daughter spent hours talking about Shikhandi. What kind of a husband was he? What kind of a father would he have been? Was he actually Amba? A woman reborn? Or his father’s son? His memories were that of a woman. His heart was a woman’s. His head, a woman’s. But for the Yaksha’s appendage, there was nothing manly in his being. ‘Once I saw him staring at me as I prepared myself for a yagna and adorned myself in bridal finery. I saw regret in his eyes. And envy. I think he regretted being denied his femininity,’ said Hiranyavarni.

‘What was he to you, mother?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Did you love my father?’

‘Yes.’

‘As a man or as a woman?’

‘A woman. Always,’ said Hiranyavarni, without a moment’s hesitation. But that was not exactly right. She loved Shikhandi, the person, to whom she had been gifted by her father in the presence of Agni, the fire-god. The person who stood by her as husband when the world condemned her for being a wicked wife. The person had managed to acquire a body of a man but was at heart always a woman.

‘But I think my father was a man, mother,’ Amba said.

‘Why do you say that?’ asked Hiranyavarni.

‘Is it not true that a child gets flesh and blood from the mother and bones and nerves from the father?’

‘Yes.’

‘I have both. If I was the child of two women then I would surely have been a ball of blood-soaked flesh. My father was no woman, mother. He was a man.’

Hiranyavarni was impressed by her daughter’s logic.

News of Amba's intelligence spread, reaching even the Rishis of the Angirasa order who decided to travel to Panchala and put it to the test. 'Are you Shikhandi's daughter or the Yaksha's daughter? Of which seed are you fruit?' they asked the young princess.

Amba replied, 'The plough belongs to my father. The field belongs to my father. I am my father's child. And my father is Shikhandi.' Then her face fell. 'Perhaps that is why no one wants to marry me. Who would want to marry a girl whose father was once a woman?'

'Fear not, my child,' said the wandering hermits, delighted at the discovery of yet another of God's surprises. 'From Prajapati has come the problem. From Prajapati will come the solution.'

PROCRASTINATION



The rains came on time and left on time, the sixteenth time since the birth of Mandhata, an indicator that all dharma had been upheld in Vallabhi by the Turuvasu kings. Fields and pastures burst into life once again. Rivers were full. Orchards glistened in the golden sunlight. Cows chewed on succulent grass. The gods had to be thanked. And so a yagna was organized.

The Kshatriyas of Vallabhi marked the site for the ceremony by shooting arrows in the four corners and a fifth one in the centre. 'We have pinned down Vastu,' they cried. The Shudras then set up the precinct by raising an enclosure using long sheets of matted palm leaves. The Brahmanas used rice flour and traced on the moist ground the image of Vasuki, the serpent king, who rises up during the rains. In its coils they scooped a fire-pit around which bricks were laid out in the shape of an eagle. The Vaishyas provided the butter and grain that would be given to Agni, the fire-god, who would carry the gifts of the king of Vallabhi above the clouds to Indra, the sky-god. Thus would the god who hurls thunderbolts and forces dark rain-bearing clouds to release rain be thanked.

'Tell your son, tell your son,' the two ghosts kept nagging Yuvanashva.

'After the rains,' said Yuvanashva. 'After the yagna.'

'If he has to be king he must learn to face any truth.'

'My truth is complicated,' argued Yuvanashva.

The yagna began. Melodious hymns filled the air. Fire crackled in the pit. A plume of smoke rose up connecting earth and the autumn sky. Yuvanashva

watched the fire blaze. ‘What truth should I tell my son? It escapes my tongue. Defies the structure of language.’ He raised the ladle to pour the butter into the fire-pit and thought, ‘I have created life outside me. I have also created life inside me. I am the ladle that pours the butter. I am the pit that receives it. I am the sky and the earth. I am seed and soil. Man and woman. Or perhaps neither. A creature suspended in between, neither here or there? Unfit to be a Raja, unfit to be a Yajamana. Will Agni accept my offering? Will Indra turn it away?’

‘Svaha,’ he said as he poured the offering. ‘Svaha,’ he said again. Each time the fire-god accepted the offering, so did the sky-god, as they had for sixteen years.

But Yuvanashva’s discomfort remained. What was the truth that the Devas accepted? Was it the truth that Vallabhi ignored or the truth that Vallabhi preferred? Was he Mandhata’s father or mother? He needed clear answers. All he got was silence. A silent earth. A silent sky. Silent rivers and silent orchards. The hills were silent. The palace was silent. Bards were silent. Even Vipula was silent.

For sixteen years, the world saw a picture of domestic bliss in the palace of Vallabhi: a king busy in the mahasabha upholding varna-ashrama-dharma, his widowed mother meditating in the room that was once her audience chamber, his three wives sitting richly dressed beside him during pujas and yagnas, and his two sons living in the inner quarters with their mothers and studying in the hermitage outside the city with their teacher.

Mandhata was for everyone the first son of the first queen. It did not matter to the servants who helped Simantini bathe that she had a flat stomach and firm breasts with signs of neither pregnancy nor lactation. They found a good reason for it. ‘Asanga is a great physician. Almost a magician who can restore a mother’s virginity,’ they said. If one pointed out the stretch marks on Pulomi’s once beautiful body, shapeless and loose after the birth of Jayanta, they would say, ‘The women of Vanga respond differently to the potions.’

The ghosts of Sumedha and Somvati were the only ones who challenged this apparition of order. ‘Vallabhi deludes itself. But below, behind and beyond, sits Prajapati, witnessing it all, the lies of its king and the rot of the royal soul.’

‘Give me time. I need time to prepare him for the truth.’

Yuvanashva looked across the fire at Mandhata who sat with his brother and teacher and other students of the hermitage. The boy was a stranger to him. He had never ever been given time alone with the boy, to know him, and to let himself be known. He did not know what his son's dreams were, what he desired and what he feared. Ever since he was taken into the women's quarters, the queens had done everything in their power to keep them apart. Shilavati had warned them, 'Motherhood is a disease when it springs in a man's body, like kingship is in a woman's. Let us both be cured of it.' And so, Shilavati never opined on matters of state, no matter how grave the situation. And the queens saw to it that their husband was never alone with Mandhata, lest he wanted to indulge his maternal instincts.

For Mandhata, Yuvanashva was a distant father, who was more interested in Vallabhi than in his children. They met only for a few hours on ceremonial occasions when the princes were paraded on elephants and chariots and palanquins as proof of the king's virility. He had spent the first seven years of his life with his mothers, and the next nine years with his teacher. Soon he would be with his wife, then with his duties, with only formal knowledge of his father.

'Let us at least go on a hunt together. I need to spend some time with my son. He must know who I am,' Yuvanashva had once requested Simantini.

'He is too young for that. Later, maybe,' she had said then.

The next time she had said. 'Not this fortnight, it is not auspicious. There has been a lunar eclipse.'

Then she had said, 'He is ill. A slight fever. Let him get better.'

It would be months before Yuvanashva would get the courage to ask again. As king, he could enforce his will. But each time he had done so, he had lost someone. First Shilavati. Then Pulomi. He did not want to lose Simantini. So he focused on kingship and hoped this separation could cure him of his intense craving to be mother.

In her capacity as first wife and chief queen, Simantini sat to the left of Yuvanashva during the yagna and joined him in thanking Indra. The other two queens sat behind. All three were dressed in dark green saris with a garland of fragrant green herbs round their neck. This was ritually prescribed for the queens had to reflect the condition of the earth, green after the rains.

Simantini's glance fell upon her husband's left thigh. The dhoti was wet with sweat, almost transparent. She could see the long gash. The scar of childbirth that the world knew as the hunting accident where the great boar plunged its tusk.

'Lies, lies.' she heard the tamarind tree shout from the corner room.

The priestesses of Bahugami who often tormented her in her dreams said, 'If you are really the mother, then show us the milk in your breasts and the tear of your skin.'

Clinging tenaciously to Mandhata, Simantini would retort, 'How dare you judge me, you who can be no woman's husband! My lie keeps my husband on the throne.'

'You lie for your husband? Really?' asked the tamarind tree.

Simantini stared into the fire-pit. The wood crackled and the grains cast in by Yuvanashva popped up and rose into the air. The goddesses of the earth mocked her, but the gods of the sky did not frown.

Sitting behind, a now plump Pulomi watched the sweat trickle down her husband's back. She felt warm. It was not the sun or the fire. It was not fatigue either. It was the sight of her husband's naked back, his broad shoulders tapering to his narrow waist, his muscles, taut as the day of their wedding, sweat glistening against his skin. Like gold. He still aroused her. But she refused to let him touch her.

'Forgive my son,' Shilavati had begged.

'I cannot,' Pulomi admitted. 'I just can't. My head cannot convince my heart. My body yearns for his touch. But as soon as I see his face, the memory of that day returns and I cannot. He can take me by force but I will not go to him willingly.'

In the initial months, shortly after the birth of his two sons and his rejection by his two wives, Yuvanashva had sought Keshini's company. He wanted someone to talk to, someone who would listen to him, someone who knew the truth, someone who could revive memories of innocent days. Who better than Keshini with her dolls and dice and the game of hide-and-seek? But Keshini was not the cherubic chattering child she once was. She was a silent woman, haunted by memories of the two boys of Tarini-pur condemned to death by her husband. Often she would be seen going to the royal cattle shed, feeding the cows and

weeping. She regretted telling Simantini about the Brahmana woman without the toe-ring. Maybe then they would not have been caught. They would still be alive and the yagna would have been completed without any disruption. She would have been a mother.

Every time Yuvanashva came to Keshini, she insisted they have intercourse. He had given children to his other wives. She wanted one too. Yuvanashva grew tired of her pleading eyes. He stopped coming. A desperate Keshini turned to Asanga; she finally understood what the doctor's eyes were always trying to say. When he came to her, he found her in bed, with a tambula in her hand. He lowered his eyes and turned away. He refused to be reduced to a seed provider for the woman he loved.

One day, Keshini realized she was eating her meals all alone, with only the tinkling of her gold bangles for company. Tears rolled down her eyes. 'There was a time, they all came to play with me. They ate in my kitchen and they rested in my courtyard. Now, if it was not for these rituals, would anyone even remember me?' she wondered. She felt she was a broken pot who did not deserve to wear a green sari.

Only Jayanta noticed Keshini's unloved face. Only he felt Simantini's anxiety and Pulomi's shame. He saw his elder brother unable to fathom the turmoil of silent emotions that shaped their childhood. He saw his father's eyes desperately searching for Mandhata every time he passed the women's courtyard. He remembered the lullabies he sang at night in the corridors outside just loud enough to be heard by Mandhata inside.

So intense was Yuvanashva's affection for Mandhata that he completely ignored Jayanta. But Jayanta never begrudged his father. Whenever he saw the king, he would rush out and hug him. 'Why must you do that? Can't you see he prefers your elder brother?' his mother would say. In response, Jayanta would say nothing. He would hug his mother too and soothe her rage.

As the Ritwiks sang the final hymns, it struck Vipula, who sat directly in front of the king during the ceremony, how different the two sons of Yuvanashva were. Mandhata: dispassionate, measured, calculating. A king. Jayanta: full of life, cheerful, emotional, sensitive. A friend. Mandhata always did the right things; Jayanta always did things that brought joy. Yama and Kama. Reborn in Vallabhi. One from within Yuvanashva's body. One from without.

He looked at the clear sky above, the three queens and their two sons below. A kingdom where the rains came on time. A kingdom where all subjects functioned according to their station in society and submitted to their stage in life. A kingdom where there was order, stability, peace and prosperity, where life was predictable, free of accidents and surprises. Was this not how it was supposed to be? Why then did the king, his friend, always look so unhappy?

‘My rule is based on a lie,’ Yuvanashva complained.

‘An untold truth is not a lie,’ Vipula told his friend.

‘It is time for the boy to learn the truth if he must be king.’

‘A king must be like Shiva, withhold some truths in his throat like the poison, Halahal, churned from the ocean of milk. Only then as Vishnu, can he distribute the nectar of order, Amrita, also churned from the ocean of milk, to all his people.’

‘My throat burns. I want to spit it out.’

‘Don’t! Every civilization needs its delusion.’

Denied access to Mandhata, Yuvanashva indulged his parental instincts with the two Pisachas. Together the ghosts and he heard stories and argued over dharma.

The ghosts always behaved as husband and wife, laughing and flirting with each other, sharing the burden of existence, discovering in each other’s hearts the meaning of life. The ghost of Somvati would sit at the feet of the ghost of Sumedha. They would chew imaginary tambula and rock on an imaginary swing. As he got used to their behaviour, Yuvanashva found their interactions endearing. They reminded him of how things were between him and his wives before the birth of his two sons, before the burning of the two boys.

Sometimes, in frustration, the ghosts would demand justice, ‘You killed us but spare yourself and your son. Why?’

‘Because we do not threaten the façade of order,’ Yuvanashva would clarify.

‘Had you two stayed men and friends, you would have been spared too.’

‘Hypocrite,’ the ghosts would snarl.

‘May you never know the joy of being called mother,’ they cursed him.

When Mandhata refused to attend Amba’s swayamvara, the two Pisachas told Yuvanashva, ‘In rejecting Amba he has rejected you, father. Do you realize that? It is one thing not to talk about you, but it is another to disrespect you.’

‘My son does not disrespect me,’ said Yuvanashva.

‘Your son respects his father. But you are not his father. You are his mother. He who finds Shikhandi’s daughter an unfit bride will surely find you an unfit mother.’

‘No, he will not,’ said Yuvanashva. ‘I have faith in my son. Vipula tells me the boy gives the most appropriate replies to the riddles of the sixty-four Yoginis. He has all the signs of a Chakra-varti. I am sure he will find a way to accommodate my truth within the framework of dharma.’

‘Before he can accommodate your truth, he must first face it,’ said the ghosts, holding the king’s hands and leading him to his throne in the maha-sabha, ‘So send for him and present before him your riddle.’

REVELATION



The sixty-four Yoginis had sixty-four riddles that could make a man a Chakra-varti. Yuvanashva had only three that he hoped would make him his son’s mother.

‘But will he give me the answers I want to hear?’ wondered Yuvanashva, ‘What if he does not? Will I still love him? Is a mother’s love unconditional?’ Burdened by fears and doubts, he sent for Mandhata.

The message was formal, ‘The king would like the presence of the prince in the maha-sabha to solve a riddle,’ leaving Simantini no choice but to let Mandhata go.

Mandhata entered the maha-sabha and found his father all alone on the throne. There was no guard around, no bard, no minister, not even a servant. Sunlight streamed in through the open courtyard. The royal banner fluttered proudly. Except for the chattering of a few pigeons, the room was silent. So different from the days when his father gave audience to the people and settled disputes.

Yuvanashva did not wear any crown. He held no bow. He struggled hard to appear less king and more parent.

A tiger-skin rug had been spread out before the throne. ‘Come sit here,’ Yuvanashva said, his face lighting up at the sight of his son. Mandhata sat down cross-legged, facing his father, his back straight, as students are supposed to sit when they receive instruction. Yuvanashva yearned to hug his son but he

restrained himself. He wondered how he should begin when suddenly a question rolled off his tongue, 'Is Ileshwar Mahadev a god or a goddess today?'

Yuvanashva had not planned to ask this question. Wherefrom had it come? Propelled by Yama, no doubt, to initiate this conversation which was very much due. Or perhaps by Kama, for this conversation was very much desired.

'More god, less goddess,' replied Mandhata.

Yuvanashva smiled. 'A king cannot confuse his subjects. Tell me this or that. Nothing in between.'

Mandhata's mind raced back to his journey from the hermitage through the streets to the palace. The markets were full of pearly white dhatura flowers. 'A god,' he replied.

'Is that the truth?'

Mandhata shut his eyes, thought for a moment and then replied with absolute clarity, 'Yes, it is.'

'Today, the moon has started to wane. The moustache of Shiva has been removed by the Pujaris and replaced by the unbound hair of Shakti. Do you still consider Ileshwara to be a god?' repeated Yuvanashva.

Mandhata was silent for some moments. Then he said, 'It is not what I consider that matters, father. This is the truth of the temple, expressed in rituals, told to us through flowers in the markets. Today there are dhatura flowers in the market and so a god resides in the temple. So it has been since the days of Ila.'

'Why do you value the temple's truth over your own feelings?'

'How else will there be order father? Everybody perceives the world differently. We have to agree somewhere. The world is full of ambiguities and confounding, even contradicting, details. Vishnu created kings to organize, identify and evaluate things, so that there is clarity in life. In every society therefore, social truths matter over personal truths.'

'What if Ileshwara *wanted* to be treated as a goddess today?' asked Yuvanashva.

'Only you, the king of Vallabhi, supreme custodian of the temple's rites, can change the rules,' replied Mandhata.

'Should I?'

'If a good king wants to be great, he must be fair to all: those here, those there and all those in between.'

Yuvanashva laughed. There was hope. Mandhata understood the amorphous nature of the world and the limitations of language and the law. He was proud of his son. He truly had all the hallmarks of becoming a Chakra-varti.

Mandhata remembered the long discussions he had with his teacher on the confining nature of words, how they fail to capture all emotions. Vipula had said, 'That is why words are not enough. We need grammar to string words into sentences, put everything in context. Sometimes even sentences fail to capture what we are trying to say. Prose is useless when speaking to the beloved. We need poetry.'

Jayanta had interjected then, 'Words don't matter, only feelings do.'

'And how do we communicate feelings without words?' Mandhata had asked.

In response, Jayanta had smiled and touched his brother, his eyes full of tenderness. Vipula watched Jayanta take his brother by the hand into the garden, and show him blue butterflies hovering over yellow flowers. Beauty of the world. Love between brothers. The affection of a teacher. All experienced without anything being spoken.

But surely the king had not called him to the mahasabha to discuss the conundrums of language or the identity of Ileshwara? 'Why have you really called me here, father?' Mandhata asked, unable to contain his curiosity any further. 'Is it to solve riddles or has it something to do with the princess of Panchala?' Mandhata knew his father was not pleased by his decision not to go.

He is just like mother, thought Yuvanashva, impatient, wants to come straight to the point. 'I could order you to go,' he said looking straight into his son's eyes.

Lowering his head in deference, Mandhata said, 'If you order, father, I would obey. Do you want me to go?'

'Only if you want to be her Gandharva.'

'She is not fit to be queen of Vallabhi.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Her reputation is tainted. Her father was not quite a man.'

'Forget reputation for a moment. What about her? Is she fit to be a wife?' asked Yuvanashva.

'I have heard she does not shy away from the truth of her father. That makes her strong. She will make a good wife. But will one such as her be allowed to sit

beside me when I perform a yagna, as my mother sits beside you when you perform yagna?’

‘If a chief queen is barren, the second queen must sit beside the king.’ Another sentence that had slipped out without prior thought; Yuvanashva was convinced that Yama, or Kama, or Prajapati himself, was controlling his tongue.

‘Yes, I know the rules, father. But my mother is not barren. I am her son,’ replied Mandhata, smiling, suddenly uncomfortable.

‘How do you know?’ asked Yuvanashva.

Mandhata did not like this question. ‘She told me so. Everybody knows that the chief queen, Simantini, is my mother,’ he said, suddenly feeling unsure of what he had said. Mandhata remembered the lullabies his mother sang him. How they comforted him. Then he remembered the lullabies he had overheard his father sing, at night, as he walked in the corridor outside the queen’s courtyard. These were always sweeter. That deep unexplored yearning from the well of childhood dreams sprang up again. A strange feeling rose in the pit of his stomach. What was the real reason his father had called him here, he wondered. Where were the riddles?

Yuvanashva’s heart ached for his son. He saw the confusion in his eyes. The racing thoughts. He knows, Yuvanashva deciphered. Somehow he knows.

Yuvanashva changed the topic, ‘Your teacher says you are brilliant. Your understanding of dharma matches your grandmother’s.’ Mandhata beamed at the compliment. ‘But I will agree with Vipula only if you answer three of my riddles.’

‘I will try my best, father.’

Yuvanashva asked the first question. ‘A magician once beheaded a newly-wed couple. He then put the man’s head on the woman’s body. And the woman’s head on a man’s body. Who is the husband now? Who is the wife?’

‘The one with a man’s body is the husband. The one with a woman’s body is the wife.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘The husband creates life outside his body. The wife creates life inside hers. In time, the woman’s head will accept the man’s body and think like a man. And the man’s head will accept the woman’s body and think like a woman. But at no

time will the man's body behave like a woman or the woman's body behave like a man.'

'Very good logic,' said Yuvanashva. 'Very good indeed. Now, here is a second one. Two boys. Both orphans. The best of friends. A god's curse makes one of them a woman. Now the two of them want to marry. Live as husband and wife. But the ancestors of the boy who became a girl object. Who will raft us across the Vaitarni, they ask. How must a king treat the boy who now has a girl's body, as a man to the satisfaction of his ancestors or as a woman to the satisfaction of his friend?'

'As a man. To treat him as a woman is to submit to desire. Desire is the greatest threat to dharma. It changes over time and can never be trusted. What does not change over time and what can always be trusted is duty. Our duty, what we are supposed to do, how we are supposed to behave, is fixed at the time of birth. For birth reveals our biology and our lineage, the two cornerstones of dharma.'

'So, by your definition, Shikhandi is a woman even though later in life he acquired a man's body.'

'Yes, I do. If, like the Pandavas, we accepted the truth of the moment, rather than the truth of birth, then nothing will be predictable in society. A man today may have been a woman yesterday. And a woman today may become a man tomorrow. Husbands will never know if there is a wife waiting for him when he returns home. Children will never be sure if yesterday's father is father even today. The Pandavas may have won the war at Kuru-kshetra by treating Shikhandi as a man. But all the kings of Ila-vrita reject their version of dharma. They believe Bhisma was right. Shikhandi was and remains a woman in their eyes. He should not have entered the battlefield. Shikhandi's daughter embodies an aberration, a disruption of order. She has therefore been rejected by all the kings of Ila-vrita.'

Yuvanashva raised his eyebrows, 'Impressive. Just to let you know that your grandmother believes the Pandavas were right.'

'What?' said Mandhata in disbelief.

Yuvanashva was escatic that his son thought like him, not like his mother. 'Now for the third story. A king accidentally drank a magic potion that was

meant to make his wife pregnant. It made him pregnant. The gods delivered the child from his left side. What should the child call the king?’

Yuvanashva’s heart beat fast. ‘Mother,’ said Mandhata.

Yuvanashva smiled. A warmth filled his heart. He wanted to hug his son and kiss him. Make him feel his love.

Mandhata saw the glow on his father’s face. He felt relieved.

But the riddle was not complete. ‘And can the child be king?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘No, he cannot,’ replied Mandhata. ‘A child follows his father’s footsteps, not his mother’s. The king is the child’s mother. So he cannot pass the crown to his son.’

‘Oh my son,’ Yuvanashva blurted out, his face crumpling, ‘you have just judged yourself. Called me a mother and denied yourself your crown.’

‘What?’ Mandhata did not understand his father’s words.

‘My son. I am the king who accidentally drank the magic potion. You were the child born of my body. You have just declared me your mother and denied yourself the crown. You are as much an aberration as Shikhandi’s daughter whom you have rejected so contemptuously.’ Yuvanashva parted his dhoti and showed him the scar on his inner thigh, ‘This is where Asanga made the incision and drew you out prematurely. You clung to life. My mother said we should kill you. I stopped her. I had given you life. Held you in my body for seven moons. How could I let them take you away?’

‘This is some test, is it not?’ said Mandhata, his head spinning.

‘No Mandhata, this is the truth. I, your father, am actually your mother. My thigh was your womb. You grew up drinking the milk of my body.’ Mandhata felt nauseous. The images that floated before his eyes made him sick.

Yuvanashva continued, ‘When you were a child, you called me “ma”. But then they trained you to call me “da”. Simantini became your mother. And I was reduced to be your father.’

Mandhata lowered his head and did not speak. The rumours were true. Those glances of the Kshatriya and Brahmana boys in the hermitage did hide something. And there was truth in those dreams of a man in a green sari putting him to sleep which his mother always dismissed.

The silence weighed heavily. ‘Say something,’ said Yuvanashva softly.

Mandhata lowered his head and spoke softly, ‘Does everyone know? Am I the only one who does not know? The last fool to learn the truth.’

‘It is a palace secret. The three queens know it. Your grandmother knows it. The doctor and your teacher knows this. Now you do too. I am glad it is out. I feel that I have been relieved of a great burden.’

Mandhata kept quiet. His mind was racing. The implications of what he had just learnt made him insecure. Restless. Then he spoke, ‘Let us keep this within the family, father, as it has always been. Why tell the world what it does not want to know? To me you will always be father and Simantini will always be mother. Nothing has changed. Let us leave this room and forget this conversation.’

This was not what Yuvanashva wanted to hear from his son. All his hopes collapsed. ‘No, son. You cannot just forget this conversation. Now that it is out, it is no longer my truth. Now it is your truth too. You cannot run away from it.’

‘I am not running away from it, father. I am giving it its due place. I was raised believing that my father was a king, that my mother was his first queen, and that I was his firstborn, his heir. I will not let anything shake this belief.’

‘You yourself said that a man born of a man’s body cannot be king.’

‘That was a riddle. This is my life.’

‘So you change your decision because you are a victim of your own verdict? Would it not be better to change your verdict—say that the child conceived in and delivered from a king’s body has the right to inherit his mother’s crown.’

‘I will say no such thing. To me this conversation has not happened. I am the king’s firstborn. This is the only truth Vallabhi has known. This social truth matters more than personal truths.’

‘To whom, son? Don’t forsake a truth because it is convenient,’ Yuvanashva appealed. He bent forward to touch Mandhata. Mandhata pulled back. ‘I gave birth to you, son. I nursed you on these breasts. I held you in my arms and put you to sleep. This is your truth. Accept it like a man. Accept it like a king.’

‘Why did it take you sixteen years to declare this? Have you had your fill of kingship? You let silence uphold your kingship. Why do you not let it uphold mine?’

‘I submitted to this lie so that none would challenge your right to the throne. I wanted my son, not Pulomi’s, to be king. I did what any good royal mother

would do. I secured your inheritance,’ said an anguished Yuvanashva.

Mandhata lowered his head to the floor and then rose to his feet. ‘I think it is time for me to leave.’

Yuvanashva remained seated. ‘Can I ask you something?’

‘What?’

‘There is no one here. Just you and me. Will you, just once, just this once, call me “mother”?’ Mandhata stiffened. ‘Just once,’ pleaded Yuvanashva, ‘I so long to hear it.’

‘No,’ said Mandhata. He stormed out of the mahasabha. Out of the palace. Out of Vallabhi. To the banks of the Kalindi. To bathe. To wash away the filth of his father’s words. To be alone.

He returned late at night to the palace. He went straight to Simantini’s chamber. She was sleeping. He slid into bed next to her. Simantini woke up. ‘Where were you?’ she asked making more room for him, covering him with her quilt. ‘I was worried.’ She felt him tremble. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘You are my mother, are you not?’

‘Yes, I am. Why do you ask? What happened?’

‘Nothing,’ he said.

Nothing had happened. Nothing had changed. The conversation in the mahasabha had not taken place. He tried hard to forget it. In his dream, he saw the sixty-four Yoginis. They were all laughing.

MANDHATA’S INSECURITY



Mandhata woke up with a throbbing headache. He remembered the events of the previous day. The riddles. The truth. ‘You are as much an aberration as Shikhandi’s daughter,’ he had said. Mandhata became nervous.

Jayanta found his elder brother sitting on the edge of the bathing tank throwing pebbles in the water, not noticing the beautiful ripples they created. This is what Mandhata did whenever something bothered him. Jayanta came and sat next to his brother but spoke not a word.

‘Go away,’ said Mandhata.

But Jayanta did not leave. He did not believe in leaving people alone, especially when they were unhappy. ‘What happened?’ he asked genuinely concerned.

‘Father may not want me to be king,’ said Mandhata finally.

Jayanta found that hard to believe. Mandhata was a natural king. Everyone said so: the astrologers, the Acharyas. As children, during games, he always took the role of the leader, giving orders, commanding respect, inspiring everyone to follow him.

‘Guess he will make you king now. I shall be Vallabhi’s Dhritarashtra, bypassed in favour of the younger brother,’ said Mandhata looking at his brother briefly, then turning away.

Jayanta could not help smiling. ‘Not everybody wants to be king, brother. I am no contender to the throne,’ he said, holding his brother’s hand.

‘But father wants it so,’ said Mandhata without looking at Jayanta.

‘Has he said it?’ asked Jayanta.

‘No. But I know so.’

‘So all this brooding is because of your imagination.’

‘He told me how I was born.’

‘Oh,’ said Jayanta. So that’s what it was. The truth was finally out in the open.

‘Did you know about it?’ asked Mandhata.

Jayanta nodded his head. Of course he knew about it. His mother reminded him of it almost everyday. ‘He is not normal. That is why you must be king,’ she would say. And he would reply, ‘How can I be king, mother? How can I manage a kingdom when I cannot even manage my bowels? Imagine me sitting on the throne. Just when the priests are about to hand me the golden bow, I will break wind. The mallika flowers will wither. The handmaidens will faint. The priest will choke on his mantras as he refuses to inhale. It will be worse when I lead our army into the battlefield. They will not know if I am blowing the conch-shell trumpet of war or breaking wind. There will be confusion. Enemies will overrun our city. No mother, don’t even consider me to be king.’ Through humour, Jayanta curtailed Pulomi’s ambitions. Kingship did not matter to Jayanta. Love did.

‘I am the last one to know,’ said Mandhata mournfully.

‘That should change nothing. You are still the firstborn. And your understanding of dharma is unmatched.’

‘Apparently it does. I feel so helpless.’

Jayanta saw his brother's shoulders droop. 'If it bothers you so much maybe you should seek grandmother's advice,' he suggested.

'Whose?' asked Mandhata, surprised by Jayanta's suggestion.

'Grandmother's,' Jayanta repeated. 'She always knows what must be done.'

'She wanted to kill me at birth. She would be more than happy that I will not be king, that her son has finally seen sense.' Mandhata got up and started walking back toward Simantini's courtyard. Jayanta followed him too.

SHILAVATI'S ADVICE



Every morning Shilavati would get up earlier than everyone else, impatient to see her son, who, despite their differences, always began his day after he had placed his forehead at her feet. But every time Yuvanashva entered her room she would maintain a stony face and feign indifference. Yuvanashva would not respond to her indifference. He would bow and leave without saying a word. So it had been, for sixteen years. Sixteen years of pride and anger and frustration. Sixteen years of silence. Sixteen years of waiting for the other to let go.

After he left, Shilavati would follow a routine—a set of rituals to fill the day and pass the time. Prayers to the sky-gods, then prayers to the earth-goddesses, then prayers to the ancestors represented usually by a lone crow who visited her courtyard to eat rice. Then she would go to her kitchen garden and water the plants and watch the vegetables grow around the image of Lajja-gauri. Then she would go to her stables and feed her horses, her cows, her elephants and her dogs. She would talk to the animals, give them all her advice that was actually meant for her son: the things he did right and the things he could improve upon. They were silent witnesses to her sense of rejection.

In the evening, many residents of Vallabhi came to see her: the ivory merchant, the goldsmith, the chief of goat herders, the keeper of the mango orchard. They offered her gifts. Shared their problems with her. She offered no solutions—that was for the king—just a patient ear. This was enough for them. She was still the royal mother, the most reliable shoulder they could cry on.

The most exciting days were when her spies came to her with information. They were as vigilant as ever and unflinching in their loyalty. 'Yuvanshava does not appreciate the information we bring him,' they told her, 'He broods all the time.'

The spies told her that the elders of the Kuru clan had left Hastina-puri, become vanaprasthis, wandering in the forest. ‘For a long time Dhritarashtra was not willing to leave the comforts of the palace,’ said the spies. ‘Especially the roasted meat, he loves so much. But Bhima made things unbearable. Every day Bhima would join them during meals and describe in gory detail how he killed each of the Kauravas. How he broke their bones. How he drank Dushasana’s blood. Dhritarashtra would hear all this. Tears would roll down his eyes. But he would continue to eat his meat. Finally, his wife Gandhari said, “Enough. Have some dignity.” At long last the blind old man gathered the courage to put down the meat, wash his hands, get up and leave the palace. Gandhari followed him as a dutiful wife should. Kunti followed them too. She found her son’s treatment of his uncle unbearable.’

The spies also told Shilavati how no prince of Ilavrita participated in Amba’s swayamvara. ‘A slap on the face for the Pandavas,’ she told her dogs the next day.

She learnt that Mandhata had also turned down the invitation. How this had upset Yuvanashva. How he had called his son to answer riddles in the mahasabha. ‘I think he plans to tell his son the truth about his birth. If I know that boy, he will reject the truth. For he will realize its implications,’ she told her cows.

When Shilavati learnt how troubled Mandhata was after spending the evening with Yuvanashva, Shilavati decided to call the boy for a meal.

GRANDMOTHER’S MEAL



Mandhata was surprised by the invitation. ‘She has never sent for me,’ he said, not sure if he was excited or nervous.

‘Don’t be afraid. She is very nice,’ said Jayanta, who since childhood had invited himself to his grandmother’s kitchen. ‘She is our grandmother. She is supposed to love us and feed us,’ he would say. He demanded her affection. Shilavati, like everyone else, lavished him with it.

In all these years Mandhata had always kept away from his grandmother. He would never go anywhere unless invited.

Having finally received Shilavati’s invitation, Mandhata entered her courtyard with trepidation. Once, this was the centre of power in Vallabhi. Now, it was a desolate place. The floor was clean, the walls were painted, but an eerie sense of

emptiness prevailed, as if the ghosts of the past had their tongues cut out and could not speak.

Shilavati's old maid, dressed in bright yellow with a massive gold nose ring, welcomed the prince. She kissed him on his forehead and embraced him affectionately. She looked at him with adoring eyes and then led him to the kitchen. 'You look like your grandfather. He was very handsome.' She laughed like a young girl, then covered her mouth in embarrassment and asked Mandhata what he would eat. 'Devi instructed me to make sweet pancakes with coconut and jaggery. She said those were your favourites.'

They were. How did she know? Her legendary spies? Or maybe Jayanta?

After Mandhata had finished his fourth pancake and washed his hands, Shilavati walked in. He got up and fell at her feet. 'Come,' she said. He followed her to what was once her audience chamber, empty except for two blackbuck pelts. The walls were covered with images of creepers. 'Sit,' she said pointing to one of them.

She wore undyed fabric. She was old, bent and wrinkled. She used a walking stick made of buffalo horn. The regal air was evident. She still had a vertical line of sandal paste stretching from the tip of her nose to her forehead. Around her arm was a gold talisman hanging from a black thread. No other jewellery. She had long ago stopped wearing the chain of gold beads and tiger claws.

'So, you are afraid you will not be anointed king,' she came straight to the point.

'Have your spies told you this?'

'I don't need spies to tell me this. It is written all over your face.'

'He says I am an aberration. Imperfect. Not born of a woman. Hence not fit to be king.'

'You can twist that idea in your favour if you wish. Declare that by not being born of a woman, you are an ayonija, untainted by menstrual blood, as pure as the seven primal Rishis, born of Prajapati's thoughts.'

'Is that true?'

'If you repeat it several times, it will become true.'

Mandhata smiled. 'Should I do that?'

'You can, if you wish. But there is an easier way to secure your kingship.'

Mandhata was all ears. 'How?'

‘Marry Amba.’

‘What?’

‘Hear me out. She is the princess of Panchala. If you marry her, you will have the Pandavas as your uncles-in-law. Nobody then, not even your father, will dare deny you the crown of Vallabhi.’

‘That is coercion.’

‘That is politics,’ said Shilavati.

Mandhata felt the aura of authority around this old, bent and wrinkled woman before him. ‘But I have turned down the invitation to the swayamvara,’ he said.

‘That is not the only way to marry a girl. Follow the way of the Rakshasas. Abduct her as Bhisma abducted the princesses of Kashi. Make her yours by force. If you really want to be king.’

Mandhata was speechless. Now he knew why his grandmother was regarded as a great ruler. She knew every twist and turn of the law. ‘You once did not want me to live. Today you are helping me be king. Why?’

Picking up a slice of betel-nut, Shilavati said, ‘I see in you the soul of a king. That is all that matters. Vallabhi needs you. Imperfect or not, you must be king. I too have the soul of a king. The Angirasa saw that. But my body came in the way. I will not let these silly superficial rules hold you back. You deserve to be king.’

Mandhata hugged his grandmother. As Jayanta said, she was not a bad person at all. With one conversation, she had made him master of his destiny. He did not feel helpless anymore.

A few days later, the city of Vallabhi saw a sight that they had not seen for thirty years. A bejewelled elephant with great white tusks entered the city. On it sat Mandhata. With him was his new bride, Amba.

GOLD ANKLETS FOR AMBA



Shilavati woke up to the sound of singing crows. Crows don’t sing. But they did that day. ‘She is pregnant. She is pregnant,’ they sang. ‘What more can you ask of a grandson. What more can you ask of his wife.’

It was as if Amba entered Vallabhi pregnant. She bled not once.

All Mandhata’s reservations about making Shikhandi’s daughter his bride were laid to rest the moment he saw Amba. She was ravishing. A woman’s

woman. Doe-eyed. Full lips. Breasts like the bilva fruit. Thighs round and smooth as the trunk of the banana tree. He could not resist her charms. Struck by Kama's love-dart, he made love to her on the elephant on the high road connecting Vallabhi to Panchala. Under a banyan tree next to the Kalindi, her field accepted the Turuvasu seed.

Yuvanashva felt a stab of envy. 'It took me thirteen years, three wives and a yagna to conceive my first child. He is more blessed by Ileshwara than I ever was.'

Envy turned to rage when he learnt his mother had sent Amba a pair of golden anklets. 'She wanted to kill the boy at birth. Called him a disease. A threat to dharma. Now she accepts his wife as queen as if Mandhata has already been anointed heir. She presumes too much. So what if he is now the son-in-law of the Pandavas. He who does not have the courage to face the truth, will never be king of Vallabhi.'

Yuvanashva called for a council of elders. It was time they knew the truth about Mandhata.

To his utmost irritation, the elders of all four varnas came bearing gifts made by their wives for the royal mother-to-be. 'Congratulations,' said the Shudra elders. 'Now you can retire in peace. The next generation is on its way.'

'So when are you planning Mandhata's coronation?' asked the Vaishya elders. 'Everyone thinks it will be in autumn, after the harvests, before the mists.'

'Mandhata's coronation? Where did you get the idea?' asked Yuvanashva.

'We assumed,' said the Kshatriya elders, surprised by the king's irritation.

'Mandhata can never be king,' said Yuvanashva. 'He is imperfect.'

A murmur spread through the council. 'What are you saying?'

'Tell me why was Dhritarashtra not crowned king of Hastina-puri. Why was the crown given to his younger brother, Pandu, instead?' asked Yuvanashva.

'Because Dhritarashtra was blind,' said the Brahmana elders.

'And Devapi? Why was he forced to give up the throne in favour of Shantanu?'

'Because Devapi had a skin disease,' said the Vaishya elders.

'A king must be perfect in mind and body and lineage. Dhritarashtra and Devapi were imperfect of body. Mandhata is imperfect of lineage. He is not the sprout of a king's seed. He is not the sapling of a queen's soil either. He was

conceived in my body after I drank the magic potion accidentally. How then can he be king?’

The Shudra elders could not believe what they were hearing. ‘What is the king saying? Has he gone mad?’ they asked.

‘Yes, he has,’ said Shilavati, when news reached her chamber. ‘Tell the elders, they must declare Mandhata king quickly, because Yuvanashva is going mad. He is saying things that make no sense. Imagine a man who claims to be a mother.’ She laughed.

The elders of all four varnas laughed. Everyone laughed. ‘Yuvanashva has gone mad,’ they said. ‘Let us make Mandhata king.’

Yuvanashva shouted over the deafening laughter, ‘I speak the truth, Mandhata is born of my body.’ The laughter continued ‘Believe me. Why don’t you believe me? If Draupadi can be born in a sacrificial pit why can Mandhata not be born in the body of a man?’ But nobody heard Yuvanashva. They only laughed and concluded his words were the ravings of a madman.

When the sun had set and the elders had left, the Pisachas entered the mahasabha of the Turuvasus. Their twin voices echoed in the empty hall, ‘The truth has finally been told.’

‘But it has not been heard,’ said Yuvanashva, a broken man. ‘Vallabhi gags my truth with the lies of my mother. My people laugh and see only what they want to see. They don’t see me. The real me. Why then should I stay?’

RENUNCIATION OF THE KING



The next day, just before dawn, the gatekeepers of Vallabhi saw the king standing under the gate facing the eastern sky. They saluted him. He ignored them.

His eyes were shut. They noticed he was silently mouthing a hymn. He unwrapped his uttarya and began unknotting his dhoti.

Realizing what was happening, one of the gatekeepers ran to the palace. ‘The king is renouncing the world,’ he shouted.

The news woke the palace in an instant. There was pandemonium. The queens ran into Shilavati’s courtyard, a confused look in their eyes. Was this true? Had the king actually left? The servants started wailing as if someone had died.

‘He cannot just do this without taking my consent. The Shastras insist on this,’ said Shilavati.

‘Devi, he is disrobing at the gate at this very instant,’ said the gatekeeper.

That very moment, the whole palace saw Shilavati lose her regal majesty. She crumpled to the floor. Simantini and Pulomi rushed to help her up. She looked like a helpless old mother, wrinkled and toothless. Tears rolled down her cheeks. ‘All of a sudden. Without even a warning. Did he tell you anything?’

‘No, he did not,’ said Keshini.

The tears kept rolling. The wailing of the palace women was getting louder. Shilavati beat her chest as she had done the day her husband died. Yama’s elephant goad had struck her soul once again. The pain was unbearable. ‘At least he could have told me. Oh my son. My son,’ she cried. Taking a deep breath she told Mandhata, ‘Take me to him. Let us at least see him before he departs.’

The guards ran to the stables to prepare the horses. Mandhata and Jayanta mounted their chariot. Vipula joined them. Palanquins were made ready for the queens. ‘No, I will ride on a chariot,’ said Shilavati, ‘It is faster. We must hurry.’ She had to be picked up and placed on the chariot. Her knees were weak.

A crowd had gathered at the city gates, by the time they got there. The news of the king’s renunciation had spread through the city. The sun was about to rise. Yuvanashva had just thrown mud over his shoulder and had started walking towards the horizon, his back to the city.

He heard the chariots. The sound of familiar voices, accompanied by sobbing and wailing. ‘Wait, wait. Turn back.’

Yuvanashva started walking faster. Away from Vallabhi, from the wailing of his people. Why were they crying like orphaned children? Was this just ritual? Had they not rejected him?

‘Father, turn back. At least bid us a formal farewell. Everyone is here. Your wives. Your sons. Your mother. Your subjects,’ he heard the sweet voice of Jayanta. It was full of affection, and pain. It took all his determination not to turn back.

‘Arya, please turn back for the venerable Shilavati. She deserves at least a glance.’ It was Vipula. But Yuvanashva refused to turn back. He could not. He had to continue walking.

‘Yuva. Yuva. Why so much anger? I am a foolish old woman. Forgive me. Turn back. Look at me. Know that I have always loved you,’ said Shilavati.

Tears rolled down Yuvanashva’s eyes as he heard his mother’s frail voice. I don’t want to punish you, he wanted to say. I just want you to love me for the truth that I am. I want freedom from all lies. But he could say nothing. He did not want to defend or explain his actions. How he longed to turn around and hug her. Just once. Just once. Remember the time they were close. Before Mandhata, before Somvat and Sumedha, before Kuru-kshetra, before the three wives.

Yuvanashva slowed his pace and strained his ears, waiting for Mandhata to cry out. What would he say? Father? Mother? Mandhata said nothing, and Yuvanashva increased his pace.

Book Eight



THE STORY OF BHANGASHVANA



The sun moved west. Yuvanashva crossed familiar rice fields and mango groves. He took the highway that ran north. It was lined with fruit trees, planted long ago by the far-sighted Shilavati, that sheltered travellers and pilgrims and fed them as they made their way to Vallabhi.

By late afternoon, the landscape started getting unfamiliar. The frontier was near, Yuvanashva realized. Soon there would be no trace of order, no field, no orchard. No trees planted by the queen. The earth would be uneven and the grass wild. The only trace of civilization would be the highway cutting through the forest. Must he leave the highway? Abandon civilization itself?

Yuvanashva saw a group of men walking towards him. They had paint on their faces, and were wearing colourful clothes. The bards! Yuvanashva realized. They blocked his path by prostrating themselves before him. ‘Let me pass,’ said Yuvanashva.

‘We have one last story for you,’ said the senior bard.

‘Which one?’

‘The story we never told you. The story we never tell. The story that has never been told, except by Bhisma to the Pandavas before he died. The one that Arjuna said he forgot.’

Bhangashvana's story, Yuvanashva recollected. The man who, like him, had experienced motherhood. There was a time when he had believed that this story would stem the restlessness in his heart.

'Why now?' asked Yuvanashva.

'We finally have an audience who will not laugh,' said the bards.

Yuvanashva sat down under a jambu tree. The bards sat before him. They hummed a tune, imitating bees in a meadow, as they prepared their tongues for the narration.

'This is the story of Bhangashvana, also known as Sudyumna, better known as Ila.'

'Ila? The Ila? Our great ancestor? Bhangashvana was Ila?' asked Yuvanashva.

'Yes,' said the senior bard, with an apologetic smile. 'In ancient times, a child was given many names to confuse malevolent spirits. Ila grew up to be a strapping young prince. Prithu gave him many wives. And the wives gave him many children, both sons and daughters. One day, Ila went hunting on his favourite horse accompanied by his favourite dog. They entered a forest not knowing it was the sacred grove of Tarini. It was spring. Flowers were in full bloom. The goddess was with her consort, Shiva, and wanted no man to interrupt her pleasure. For her sake, Shiva cast a spell causing all things male in the forest to become female. Ila fell under the influence of the spell. He became a woman. His horse a mare. His dog a bitch. He looked around and found a group of peahens. No peacocks. Running through the forest were herds of doe but no stags. In the pond there were geese, no ganders. Tigresses, cow-elephants everywhere. No tigers, no bull-elephants. Ila finally came upon the goddess sitting content on Shiva's left lap, resting her head on his chest, smiling. He begged her to restore his manhood, told her that he had wives and children. But Shiva's spell could not be undone. The goddess could only modify it. She said that Ila's masculinity would wax and wane with the moon. He would be all male on full-moon days and all female on new-moon nights.'

'Like Ileshwara?' asked Yuvanashva.

'Yes,' said the bards.

'Did he establish the temple to remind people of his life?'

'We do not know that, Arya. But no one sees Ileshwara as Ila. Ileshwara is a god. Ila, a man.'

I wonder why that is, wondered Yuvanashva. Was that the only way this strange truth could be accommodated?

The bards continued, 'Ila returned home and found that he was more male when the moon waxed and more female when the moon waned. On full-moon days he was a complete man, enjoying the company of his wives. On a new-moon night, he was a woman, a beautiful woman that Budh, god of the planet Mercury, fell in love with. Ila fell in love with Budh too. They made love. Budh gave Ila children, both sons and daughters. They called Ila "mother". The Devas asked Ila's father, Prithu, if he thought of Ila as son or daughter. Prithu replied, "Ila is my child. Son or daughter, how does it matter? I love my child anyway." So it was that Ila came to be both son and daughter, man and woman, husband and wife, father and mother. Then the problems began.'

'Problems?' said Yuvanashva.

'Yes, problems. His wives did not know when to call him husband and his husband did not know when to call him wife. His subjects did not know when he was king and when he was not. The sons who called him "father" felt he preferred the sons who called him "mother". The daughters who called him "father" felt he indulged the daughters who called him "mother". There was complete chaos in the household. Even Ila lost control of his senses. When the moon waxed and his body turned masculine, he discovered that he continued to harbour a woman's thoughts. He yearned for the company of his husband. When the moon waned and his body turned feminine, he could not stop feeling like a man and he yearned for the company of his wives. Ila gave the children who called him "father" his kingdom but reserved all his attention for the children who called him "mother". He thought he was being fair. But the children did not think so. They envied each other, the ones receiving attention wanted the inheritance and the ones getting the inheritance wanted attention. They fought each other. Quarrels became brawls, brawls culminated to a great war where brother killed brother as in Kuru-kshetra. All of Ila's sons died. His daughters, their sisters, were inconsolable in their grief. Ila wept for twenty-one days. Ten days as father and ten days as mother. And one day as a parent. Pained to see Ila suffer so, Prajapati instructed Yama, the god of death, to restore the children of Ila. Yama looked at his account books and said that there was merit for only one set of sons to be resurrected, either those who called Ila "father" or those who

called him “mother”. But Ila could not choose. “Give me both,” he begged. But Yama, who did not like any juggling of his account books, refused. Then Kama came to Ila’s rescue. “Tell Yama to restore the sons whose call is sweeter,” said the god of desire. Ila did as instructed.’

‘What does that mean—whose call is sweeter?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘If Yama felt there was more love in the call of “mother” then he could restore the sons who called Ila “mother”. If he felt there was more love in the call of “father” then he could restore the sons who called Ila “father,”’ explained the bards.

Yuvanashva remembered the one time, long ago, in the delirium of fever, Mandhata had called him ‘mother’. Was that sweeter than Jayanta’s call of ‘father’? Whom would he choose to bring to life, Mandhata or Jayanta? How can such a choice be made, he wondered.

‘Yama had no children. So he consulted the Devas. The sky-gods, all male, had been fathers but not mothers; they did not know what the call of “mother” sounded like. Then he went to the earth-goddesses. The Matrikas, all female, had been mothers, not fathers; they did not know what the call of “father” sounded like. Yama then sought the help of the Rishis. The Rishis went around the world asking all men and women. Men said the call of father is sweeter. Women said the call of mother is sweeter. There was no man other than Ila who knew what it felt to be called mother. There was no woman other than Ila who knew what it felt to be called father. Realizing no one would ever know the truth, the Rishis advised Yama to restore both sets of children. “Only if I get a sacrifice,” said Yama, after making all the calculations, “so that the books stay in balance.” “Take me in their place in the land of the dead,” said Ila, determined to rescue all his children. Without further ado, Yama swung his noose and took Ila across Vaitarni. In his place all his sons, those who called him “mother” *and* those who called him “father”, were allowed to return to the land of the living.’

The conclusion pleased Yuvanashva. ‘That is what parents do. Sacrifice themselves for their children,’ he said.

‘Maybe he died to escape the chaos his body had created.’

‘That cannot be true,’ said Yuvanashva vehemently. At some distance, he saw farmers weeding out their fields. Was Ila a weed in the field of society? As Somvati was? As he was? ‘Please continue,’ he said after taking a deep breath.

‘No sooner were the children resurrected than the quarrels over inheritance resumed. To prevent another war, for the sake of order, stability and peace, the elders decided to intervene. They declared that, in times to come, all the sons of Ila would be remembered as the children of Ila, the man, and all the daughters of Ila will be remembered as the children of Ila, the woman. Ila’s land would be divided amongst all his sons. And all his daughters would be given in marriage to the sons of Ila’s elder brother, Ikshavaku. Since all future kings will have in their veins the blood of Ila, this land watered by the three great rivers will be known as Ilavrita, the enclosure of Ila.’

‘What of Ila?’

‘His memory was restricted to the rituals of the temple.’

Yuvanashva remembered chasing the bards as a child asking them if Ila was the son of Prithu and they questioning him, ‘Why do you presume he was a son?’ It all made sense now. He recollected how his mother had once addressed Ila as the false son of Prithu. Now he knew why.

‘Why is this story never told?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘Because no one ever saw this as history,’ replied the bards. ‘They said it was a poet’s imagination. Men cannot be mothers, and mothers cannot be kings.’

‘What will happen to my story?’

‘No one will ask us to narrate it. It will soon be forgotten.’

DEATH OF SHILAVATI



A group of cowherds attending to a young calf looked up and found a handsome naked man walk past briskly. Without his royal robes, his herald, and his entourage, they did not identify Yuvanashva as king. A hermit, they said to each other, and saluted him reverentially.

But Yuvanashva did not think of himself as a hermit. The parting words of the bards disturbed him. He was hurt and angry. If he had truly renounced the world, why did he feel hurt and anger? Why did he want to be remembered?

Yuvanashva felt the breeze curling around him. Tugging him back. He increased his pace and walked more forcefully. As soon as the sun slipped past the horizon, he heard the ghosts call out to him. ‘Not so fast, father. Wait for us.’

A sanyasi has no children, Yuvanashva reminded himself. He is nobody’s father, husband, son or king. He is not even a storyteller’s theme. ‘I am not even

Yuvanashva anymore,' he mumbled under his breath, ignoring the call of the ghosts.

The wind whistled. The moon rose. Yuvanashva saw the banyan tree that marked the frontier of Vallabhi, said to be haunted by a Yaksha. He felt the stab of hunger. He had not eaten all day. His muscles ached. His stomach churned. He felt weak. He remembered the vast kitchen of Keshini, with its gleaming pots and pans, and servants chopping vegetables endlessly. How she enticed him with food. He felt like munching fried lotus seeds flavoured with coarsely ground pepper and washing it down with fresh buttermilk. He brushed the thought aside. Only roots and shoots for me now. No cooked food. Not even milk. His mind wandered to the days before the children. When he and his wives were friends. When, after the evening meal, they all sat on the giant swing, and watched the sunset. Pulomi would rub the soles of his feet with oil. Keshini would fetch the game of dice. Simantini would sit on the floor and give all of them tambula after tambula, folding a surprise within each betel leaf. The musicians would play the flute. From the window they would see the cows kicking up dust as they returned home from the pastures. He heard the lowing of the cows. Felt the lotus seeds between his teeth. The fragrance of the tambula reached his nose. Saliva dribbled from the sides of his lips. He wiped it away.

'Not easy to renounce food, is it?' asked the ghosts.

'Go away,' he told the ghosts.

'Do you remember the food your mother served you on your golden plate?'

Yuvanashva felt his mother's fingers offering him soft tender fruit. Her frail voice returned. 'Yuva. Yuva. Turn back. Forgive me. Look at me, just once.' He felt her pain. He had hurt her because he knew he could. Was that necessary? He wondered what she was doing now.

'At this very moment, she is dead,' said the ghosts. Yuvanashva stopped in his tracks. 'She died just as the sun set. She was inconsolable all day. She refused to return to the palace. She sat under the gate hoping you would return. The whole city watched her wail as she never had, not even when her husband died. They could not bear to see their beloved queen in such agony. They wept with her. They cursed you. "Cruel, unfeeling son," they said. "No, no, don't say that about my son," she appealed to them. Then her heart gave way. Her head dropped to one side and she slumped into Mandhata's lap. The queens tried to revive her.

Hold on, they told her, he will be back. But she knew better. Jayanta offered to go and fetch you. But Mandhata stopped him. He said a sanyasi has no mother.'

Yuvanashva felt his tears. Wordless, meaningless sounds of mourning took shape in his throat. He wanted to control these feelings. Transcend them, as a sanyasi should. But at that moment, he did not feel like a sanyasi. He was his mother's son. And his mother was dead. All hope of reconciliation was lost. His face crumpled. The tears rolled down. He fell to the ground and began to wail. He picked up lumps of earth and began throwing them on his body like a madman. He rolled on the floor and hit his head against the ground regretting all the moments lost.

Memories returned. He in the audience chamber playing with his clay dolls. She feeding him rice and banana while giving directives to her ministers. The first time he went on a hunt with her and was surprised at how good she was with the bow. The riddles of the sixty-four Yoginis she regaled him with as she rubbed oil into his scalp. Her unabashed delight when he entered the city with Simantini. That look of pride. The love. And now she was dead. Surrounded by her three daughters-in-law and two grandsons. Her dead eyes searching for him.

Yuvanashva remembered the cawing crows of his forefathers. How they haunted his mother from the day of his birth. He picked up a rock and threw it into the darkness hoping it would hit a crow. The rock fell on the ground at some distance, scaring a snake, a mute expression of impotent rage.

His tears rolled down. His wailing reached the skies. Nobody cared that the king was crying. Nobody cared that a hermit is not supposed to cry. This was the forest. Human rules of propriety did not apply.

ACROSS VAITARNI



When the tears dried up, Yuvanashva found himself lying on the ground under the banyan tree on the banks of the Kalindi. He could still see the frontier of Vallabhi with the gigantic clay horses of the Kshetrapala Aiyana. The river shimmered like a sheet of silver in the moonlight. A raft with about six people aboard made its way to the other bank.

Has my mother crossed the Vaitarni, he wondered.

'Yes,' said the ghosts, reading his mind, 'Thirteen days have passed. All the ceremonies have been conducted. She is truly dead.'

Yuvanashva wanted to be alone. He scowled. ‘Where will we go, father?’ asked the ghosts. ‘You have pinned us down to the wrong side of Vaitarni. We have no choice but to stay as Brahma-Rakshasas and haunt you till the day you die.’

‘Why can’t you cross the Vaitarni as my mother did?’

‘You know why we can’t. Yama’s account book reflects your decree. It describes Somvati as a man. He refuses to let her pass as a woman. And I refuse to go without my wife,’ said Sumedha’s ghost.

Yuvanashva sat up. ‘How does Yama’s account book describe my mother?’

‘As the dutiful daughter of Ahuka, loving sister of Nabhaka, obedient wife of Prasenajit and doting mother of Yuvanashva,’ said Somvati’s ghost.

‘That’s it?’ A deep pain gripped Yuvanashva’s heart. ‘No mention of her long and glorious reign.’

‘No. That would make her a king, and confuse Yama.’

‘Compromise, son,’ Yuvanashva heard his mother whisper from across the Vaitarni. ‘Let social truths triumph over personal truths. Let go of your story as I have mine.’

‘My poor mother,’ cried Yuvanashva. Then he scolded the ghosts, ‘Why can’t you submit as she did? Accept what is written in Yama’s account book. It is so much simpler.’

‘Is it, father?’ asked the ghosts, their voice full of pain and pity. ‘Will you cross the Vaitarni if Yama identifies you as Mandhata’s father?’

Yuvanashva felt the warm breath of Mandhata resting in his arms, his tiny lips sucking out milk. He remembered the kind, accepting eyes of the fever-goddess. He felt Ileshwara Mahadev embracing him, caressing the scar on his inner left thigh. No, he could not accept Vallabhi’s truth. He was *not* Mandhata’s father. He would never be Mandhata’s father. He was Mandhata’s mother. Whether Mandhata accepted it or not. The scar was testimony to that. So what if the elders laughed. So what if no one believed him. So what if the bards would never narrate his tale. His truth mattered. No, he would not cross the Vaitarni as Mandhata’s father.

‘But isn’t there more glory in changing your mind than your world?’ asked the ghosts, quoting the scriptures.

‘I don’t care. I will not change my mind. I *am* Mandhata’s mother.’

‘You finally understand, father.’

‘Understand what?’

‘The truth of the moment. That is why we made you mother.’

‘You made me mother?’

‘Yes, we gave you the magic potion when you asked for water.’

So that is how it happened. Not an accident or a curse, but an act of vengeance. Memories gushed out. Yuvanashva felt violated. His nostrils flared. He wanted to throw the two Pisachas to the ground and flog them until there was no skin left on their ghostly backs. He wanted to make them repent for every moment of misery they had inflicted upon him and his family.

The ghosts read his mind.

‘Was motherhood such a bad thing, father?’ asked the ghosts.

Yes, Yuvanashva wanted to say. But no word left his lips. The whirlpool of rage lost its momentum. His breath became calm. Why am I angry? Is it because the fate of motherhood was thrust upon me? wondered Yuvanashva.

‘Would you have consumed the magic potion of your own volition?’ asked the ghosts.

‘No,’ Yuvanashva replied. No man, he realized, wanted to be a mother. What was so terrible about the experience of feeling life grow inside oneself?

‘It was not vengeance, father. It was the only way to make you part of our truth. Vallabhi rejected us for wanting to be husband and wife. You reject Vallabhi because you want to be mother. You feel our feelings. You understand.’

‘Is there any hope for us?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘Yes, there is. If the heart of man expands to accommodate our truth. Especially the heart of a king.’

‘I was once a king. But my heart refused to accommodate your truth. That is why the gods have punished me.’

‘You are still king in our eyes, father. If you, who declared Somvati as Somvat, acknowledge the truth of her womanhood, Yama will surely let us pass,’ said the ghosts.

‘Is it not too late?’

‘No.’

‘What should I do?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘At the frontier of Vallabhi, where the field ends and the forest starts, build a shrine to us,’ said the two ghosts. ‘Represent us as two rocks. Worship us as husband and wife. Only then will Yama accept us as a couple and let us cross the Vaitarni.’

‘People will reject the shrine.’

‘Don’t underestimate Manavas. Some, those who face the forest, will see us as we really are, creatures of the frontier. Two men. One of whom became a woman and a wife. The rest, who will face Vallabhi, will pretend we are man and woman, a holy couple, to be adored for household harmony. In acknowledging us through worship and by making us happy with offerings they will earn merit and change their destiny.’

‘Why did you not tell me this before?’

‘Because only now have you become Satya-kama, unafraid of any truth.’

TWO CHAKRA-VARTIS



Yuvanashva built the shrine on the frontiers of Vallabhi, between the last tree of the mango orchard and the first bush of the forest. Two rocks with eyes and palms scratched on them. After the moon set and before the sun rose, he acknowledged the two rocks as Somvati and Sumedha, wife and husband. He poured water on them. To the smaller rock on the left, he made many offerings. ‘I look upon this red flower as a toe-ring and offer it to Somvati, most chaste of wives. I look upon this leaf as a nose-ring and offer it to Somvati, most chaste of wives. I look upon this blade of grass as a bangle and this blade of grass as an anklet and offer both of them to Somvati, most chaste of wives.’ Turning to the larger rock on the right, he said, ‘I salute you, Sumedha, most noble of husbands, who refused to enter the realm of Yama without his wife. Look upon this white flower as my gift, a cow. May it sustain your household and bring you the peace and prosperity you deserve.’

A golden shaft of dawn illuminated the ceremony. With the ceremony, Somvati was finally able to make her journey across the Vaitarni. She stood to the left of Sumedha, leaning her head on his shoulder, feeling the gentle beat of his heart. It reassured her. He would be by her side for seven lifetimes to come.

‘I knew him before he became her,’ said a creature, rising from between the two rocks.

Yuvanashva fell back, startled. It was a dark and ugly creature with a pot-belly and short stumpy legs. His teeth were deformed and his breath was foul. ‘Who are you?’ asked Yuvanashva, frightened.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ said the creature. His voice was soft and soothing. ‘I am the Yaksha, Sthunakarna, who made Shikhandi a man and Somvat a woman.’ He then took a bunch of red flowers and put them lovingly on the rock representing Somvati.

‘So you are the one who made Somvat a woman and started it all,’ said Yuvanashva.

‘Somvat would not have become woman had he not feared execution on your chopping block. I would not have made Somvat a woman had Shikhandi not taken away my manhood. And Shikhandi would not have sought my manhood had Drupada not insisted on fathering a killer-son. And Drupada would not have wanted a killer-son, had the Kurus not divided his kingdom. And the Kurus would not have divided his kingdom had Drona not demanded one half of Panchala as his tuition fee. And Drona would not have wanted half of Panchala had Drupada not insulted him. And... I can go on and on. Every event is a reaction to something else. Ultimately, we all can blame Prajapati, for creating life, hence, all problems’.

Yuvanashva smiled. The Yaksha was wise. Yuvanashva got up and walked to the river to wash his face. The sun was now high in the sky but it was not hot. The Yaksha followed him and sat beside him on a rock, dipping his short legs in the water. Yuvanashva also put his feet in the water. They watched the fish move hesitatingly towards their toes. The Yaksha kept staring at Yuvanashva and smiling. ‘Is there something you want from me?’ asked Yuvanashva finally.

‘Nothing, really,’ said the Yaksha, ‘I just wanted to meet my daughter’s mother-in-law.’

‘Your what?’ The Yaksha was funny. Yuvanashva grinned and turned towards the Yaksha. But the Yaksha’s face was serious. This was no joke. He meant it. ‘What do you mean, your daughter’s mother-in-law?’

‘Are you not Mandhata’s mother?’ asked the Yaksha.

Yuvanashva looked around wondering if someone had overheard them. He suddenly felt exposed and embarrassed. *Mandhata’s mother*. Yes, he was Mandhata’s mother. Why was he feeling uncomfortable? This was the first time

this truth had been acknowledged so publicly. Was this not what he wanted? He realized it was one thing to accept the truth yourself another thing to find it being accepted by others. ‘I am,’ Yuvanashva replied softly. He felt his heart leaping in joy. ‘Yes, I am Mandhata’s mother.’

‘Mandhata is married to a girl called Amba?’

‘Right.’

‘And Amba is the daughter of Shikhandi?’

‘Yes.’ Yuvanashva was intrigued by this series of questions.

‘It was my manhood that Shikhandi used to plough his wife’s field and my seed that he planted in her soil. That makes me Amba’s father. And you are my daughter’s mother-in-law.’

‘Oh,’ said Yuvanashva. His head was spinning. It was so complicated. But then who was he to complain? ‘I don’t think Amba knows anything about you.’

‘She knows a Yaksha made her father a man. But she prefers being Shikhandi’s daughter. When one truth is accepted, another one is rejected. In accepting you as father, Mandhata has rejected you as mother. In accepting Somvati’s womanhood, you have rejected the truth of his manhood.’

‘Only a Chakra-varti can accommodate all truths,’ said Yuvanashva. ‘I always believed that my son would grow up to be a Chakra-varti, like Bharata. But Mandhata disappoints me. He will not accommodate the truth about himself—how will he accommodate other people’s truth?’

‘Don’t you have another son?’ asked the Yaksha.

‘Yes, Jayanta.’

‘Does he accept your truth?’

Yes he did, realized Yuvanashva. At that moment, something struck him, something that he had not noticed all these years: his younger son’s unconditional love for him. He recalled Jayanta running up to hug him, demanding nothing in return, not even attention, sitting beside him when the rest of the family regaled themselves in Shilavati’s courtyard, oblivious of his absence. He would constantly tell his father, ‘They all love you in their own way.’ Jayanta always tried to make him feel wanted and included. It struck him that Jayanta always saw good in people. He loved Shilavati despite her imperiousness, he loved Simantini despite her insecurities, he loved Pulomi despite her ambitions and he loved Keshini despite her bitterness. He did not

begrudge his family its frailties. He did not protest against his father's preference for the older son. Yuvanashva realized that in his obsession for the child he had created within his body, he had all but lost sight of his other son, the one created outside.

'Yuvanashva,' said the Yaksha. 'There are two kinds of Chakra-vartis. One who makes room for all in his kingdom and one who makes room for all in his heart. Mandhata yearns to be the one. Jayanta is already the other.'

FLESH AND SORROW



'There is so much wisdom in the forest,' said Yuvanashva, glad that he had met the Yaksha. 'Perhaps because the rules of man do not apply here. Everything is accommodated. Nothing is domesticated or covered or hidden. Here, there are no Lajja-gauris smothered by lotus flowers. Apsaras and Matrikas can run free, unclothed. The forest is the kingdom of the Chakra-varti.'

Sthunakarna corrected Yuvanashva, 'The forest accepts no one. It rejects no one either. No king makes rules for the forest. To exist here all you have to do is win the fight for survival. That does not mean acceptance. Prajapati has given the faculty to love, accept and accommodate only to Manavas. That is why humans struggle to create society, where might is not right, where even the weak can thrive. A Chakra-varti's kingdom will never be wild. It will be the perfect civilization, where everyone makes room for all.'

'I was not allowed to thrive in Vallabhi. But no one can stop me in the forest from declaring that I am Mandhata's mother and Jayanta's father.'

'The forest does not care, Yuvanashva. In the forest it does not matter if you are man or woman. You are either predator or prey.'

'If it does not matter, O Yaksha, why did you spend thirty years chasing Shikhandi for your manhood?'

'Because it was mine,' snarled the Yaksha. Then he thought for a while. 'No. That is not why. I gave it away of my own free will but when it was not returned, I felt incomplete. Now, with my manhood back, I still feel incomplete. This change in biology has not taken away my fears and my sorrows, my insecurities and my prejudices. I am what I was before. Only I have had a wider experience of life. Seen more, felt more. Known what it is to be within a woman. Known what it is to have a man within me. But all this experience has not taken away

the turmoil of thought and feeling. I still yearn to please my king, Kubera, gain his acceptance and his respect. I long to be loved, have a child of my own. There was a time I thought my manhood would give me peace. I realize now, no flesh offers such a guarantee.'

'You have been man and woman. I have been father and mother. Still we feel incomplete. What will grant us fulfilment?'

'I don't know.'

'That is what I will ask the teacher of teachers when I reach the mountain under the Pole Star.' His renunciation finally had a purpose.

'If he tells you, will you let me know?'

'I will tell everybody,' said Yuvanashva, suddenly excited by the prospect of meeting the great Adi-natha.

Bidding the Yaksha farewell, Yuvanashva continued deeper into the forest, determined to find the secret of completeness. Of one thing he was sure: it lay beyond the flesh.

MALE FLESH



Yuvanashva wandered in the forest, looking for the teacher of teachers, eating roots and shoots along the way, drinking river water, staring at trees bearing flower and fruit, watching animals eat, mate and migrate. In his journey, he met many hermits, each one seeking an answer to his own question.

Yuvanashva noticed something that escaped most people. All the hermits were men. Not one was a woman. 'Why is it so?' he asked, one day, when he took shelter in a cave on a rainy day. There were two other hermits in that cave. One was busy lighting a fire that would keep them warm. The other was enjoying the rain.

'Because only the male flesh is the most evolved of all flesh, a vessel worthy of wisdom,' said the hermit watching the rain. 'It is acquired after going through a thousand times eight hundred and forty lifetimes. Women are but a lifetime away.'

'What makes male flesh superior?' asked Yuvanashva.

The hermit replied, 'The male flesh, with its hanging appendage, cannot hide the truth of its desire but the female flesh can. The male flesh therefore can be caught before it submits to passion but the female flesh, only after.'

‘Women can never be Rishis,’ said the other hermit, who had overheard this conversation. ‘The seed of life, when withheld, can generate the fire that burns the fetter of desire and destiny that binds us to the world. Women, whether they like it or not, will shed their red seed each month. Men, however, have the power to conserve their white seed.’

‘Can any man be a Rishi?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘Yes, provided one is willing to step away and look at life,’ said the first hermit, suddenly finding the conversation more interesting than the rain.

‘Most men fail to realize how lucky they are. They waste their lives conquering the world rather than reflecting on their life,’ said the second hermit, warming his hand over the fire.

Did my grandfather become a Rishi? Yuvanashva wondered. And Mandavya? Then he remembered his guru’s gentle wife, Punyakshi, who had silently and dutifully followed him to the forest. Was she just a companion, doomed by her body never to realize the wisdom of the Rishis?

‘Can I be a Rishi?’ asked Yuvanashva.

‘Of course. You have already taken the first step, become a sanyasi, stepped away from all things worldly.’

‘I may look like a man but I am not sure that I am a man,’ said Yuvanashva. The hermits looked at him quizzically. ‘I have created life outside me as men do. But I have also created life inside me, as women do. What does that make me? Will a body such as mine fetter or free me?’

The two hermits in the cave had never heard such an incredible question. They sensed the truth of what was being said. They did not laugh. Instead, to Yuvanashva’s delight, they were genuinely intrigued. Both hermits spoke to other hermits, who spoke to their teachers who spoke to wandering sages. Before long, all the sanyasis across Ila-vrita were talking about Yuvanashva, the pregnant king, and his strange question. But no one had an answer for him.

‘Will the teacher of teachers know the answer?’ asked Yuvanashva.

The hermits replied, ‘He will surely know.’

‘Where can I find him?’

‘Only the Siddhas, Yaja and Upayaja, know his whereabouts. They were his students. But before you ask for directions, ask them why one claims Adi-natha is an ascetic while the other insists Adi-natha is a nymph.’



Yuvanashva found Yaja and Upayaja under a banyan tree next to a waterfall in the forest, arguing about desire and destiny. They looked no older than on the day when they came to Vallabhi to perform the yagna. 'Life is to be measured not by years but by breaths. We breathe only twice a day; once at dawn and once at dusk. After the war at Kuru-kshetra, there is not much of the world to inhale, but much to exhale. Besides, we don't argue as much as we once did,' they said.

The Siddhas showed no signs of recognizing Yuvanashva. Before Yuvanashva could say a word, Yaja turned to Upayaja and said, 'He wonders why I consider Adi-natha a man and why you insist Adi-natha is a woman.'

'Must we tell him Adi-natha is neither?' asked Upayaja.

'How can he be neither?' Yuvanashva exclaimed. 'He must be one or the other or both, like Ila and me.'

'Why?' asked Yaja, smiling.

Yuvanashva had no answer.

'Stop being such a Manava. Look beyond your limited experience. Look beyond your flesh,' said Upayaja.

'How can I? Flesh is what I see.'

'But flesh is not what we show,' said Yaja.

Upayaja spread out his arms and looked up at the sky, 'Know more words, see new worlds. Stop being a Manava. Grow to be a Rishi,' said Upayaja. 'There is a world beyond the flesh, a vision greater than anything that is shown and seen.'

'The Manava looks at the manhood of Adi-natha,' revealed Yaja.

'But when he wonders what the idea expressed through the manhood is, he becomes a Rishi,' revealed Upayaja.

'What do you mean?' asked Yuvanashva.

The wind rustled through the leaves of the banyan tree. The steady sound of falling water was soothing. Yuvanashva felt his mind waking up like a lotus exposed to the morning sun. His heart felt the excitement of a bumblebee that senses the presence of nectar.

'Tell me,' said Yaja, 'When the priest puts a bow in the king's hand during a coronation, does he expect the king to be an archer?'

'No,' said Yuvanashva. 'The bow is not to be taken literally. It is a symbol. It represents balance and poise that a king must display at all times. A bow is

useless if the string is too tight or too loose and a king is useless if he is too stern or too lax.'

Then Upayaja asked, 'Do you believe the teacher of teachers sits in the north under the Pole Star?'

Yuvanashva was surprised by the question. 'Of course he does!' he said. He saw the brothers smiling. Suddenly unsure, he asked, 'Does he not? Why then are all sanyasis told to walk north towards the mountains?'

'Maybe the north being referred to is not the literal north but the symbolic north. The place where all things are still and stable. What better way to represent stillness than with the Pole Star? What better way to represent stability than with mountains? North, the symbolic north, indicated by the still Pole Star and the unmoving mountain, is the seat of wisdom, which enables man to cope with change.'

Yuvanashva's eyes lit up. The language of symbols. It was spoken all around him. Yet, he had never paid attention to it.

The Siddhas were pleased with the expression of discovery on Yuvanashva's face. They got up and took Yuvanashva to the cave behind the waterfall. There, on the wet mossy walls, were two images. One of a stern ascetic, the other of an alluring enchantress. Shiva and Shakti. Both Adi-natha, the teacher of teachers.

'What do you see before you?' asked Yaja, his voice bouncing off the walls of the cave.

'A man and a woman? Husband and wife? Brother and sister? Or something else?' prompted Upayaja.

Yuvanashva looked at the two images, one with the broad chest and the other with perfect breasts. Certainly not man or woman. Neither husband and wife nor brother and sister. Something else. Symbolic man and symbolic woman. That's what they were. Vehicles of an idea. Two ideas. No. One idea, two expressions. Two halves of the same idea. Mutually interdependent.

'Well done,' said Yaja, feeling the flowering of wisdom in the lake of Yuvanashva's mind. 'To me, my master's teachings revealed the truth of the soul, the unchanging truth within us that witnesses all things. I have chosen to represent this as a man.'

Upayaja said, 'To me, my master's teachings showed me the truth of the world that is constantly changing around us. I have chosen to represent this as a

woman.'

'But why not choose woman to represent the soul and man to represent the world?' asked Yuvanashva.

'You ask this question only because you believe soul is superior to matter,' said Yaja.

'And men superior to women,' added Upayaja.

'Must one be superior to another?' asked Yaja.

'Can one exist without the other?' asked Upayaja.

I still think like a Manava. Limited by the ways of society. I must break free, thought Yuvanashva. He replied, 'Without either there is neither. They are two halves of the whole. Neither can be superior or inferior. At least not to the Rishi. It is the Manava's mind that creates such hierarchies and prevents women from becoming Rishis.'

Said Yaja, 'The female form lends itself best to *represent* matter because both create life within themselves.'

Said Upayaja, 'The male form lends itself best to *represent* soul because both create life outside themselves.'

'Within you is your soul, Adi-natha as Shiva, silent, observant, still.'

'Around you is matter, Adi-natha as Shakti, ever-changing, enchanting, enlightening, enriching, empowering.'

Yuvanashva sensed Shiva within him, who never judged him, whether he was son or husband, father or mother, king or killer. Around him was Shakti manifesting as his mother, his wives, his sons, stirring emotions in his heart, provoking him into action. In between, connecting the soul to the world was his mind, trapped by change on one hand and stillness on the other.

Yuvanashva realized Ileshwara was not a god, or an ancestor. Ileshwara was a symbol, a window to wisdom. Shiva on full moon days, Shakti on new moon nights, soul becoming matter with the waning moon and matter becoming soul with the waxing moon. At another level, a more subtle level, the deity represented the myriad forms of matter, sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes in between, always provoking the devotee, the mind. Beyond it all, formless, stood the still soul, awaiting discovery.

Yuvanashva's heart fluttered with new-found wisdom. So profound. So peaceful. Free from the snarling power games between men and women. Free

from the constricting vocabulary of society. There was more to Yuvanashva than being Mandhata's mother and Jayanta's father. He was more than someone's king, husband and son. He was a soul looking at an ever-changing world through an ever-changing mind. He had lived so many lives. Some happy and some sad. Some as Yama and some as Kama. Some as father, some as mother. Some as son, some as husband. The soul within observed it all.

'Vipula told me that Yaja is the brother who loves the banyan tree and Upayaja is the one who admires the waterfall. But now I realize you don't love the banyan tree; you love what it represents—that which does not change. And you,' said Yuvanashva looking towards Upayaja, 'you love not the waterfall but what it represents—that which changes. These are the two truths of the world that Yagnavalkya revealed long ago to Janaka. We are all trapped in the world of changes, where we feel trapped by destiny and propelled by desire. The point of life is to find that which does not change, the freedom from it all. Moksha.'

Yuvanashva thanked the Yaksha for leading him to the two Siddhas. He had accepted his flesh. They revealed his soul. They were no longer just sorcerers. They were now his teachers.

As he was about to take their leave, Yaja shouted from behind, 'Your soul is rich with wisdom, your flesh rich with experience. We have not forgotten you, Yuvanashva. Once you were the king of Vallabhi, our patron. Now you are our student.'

'We wonder what makes you truly happy?' said Upayaja. 'That we changed your world with magic or that we changed your mind with knowledge?'

ASH OF THE ELDERS



Meanwhile, just below the northern mountains, a fire claimed the lives of three people. 'Run,' the old blind man had shouted as soon as he sniffed the smoke.

'Why?' asked his blindfolded wife. His sister-in-law remained silent as a wall of fire descended from the treetops upon them. Thus did the world end for the elders of the Kuru clan.

Yuvanashva came upon the charred remains of Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti. But he could not recognize them. All he saw were three burnt bodies, almost ash. Were these kings or hermits, he wondered. He was not even sure

whether the ash belonged to men or women. Were they young? Old? Fire had wiped out all identity.

Yuvanashva picked up the ash and let it pass through his fingers. In the end this is all that remains of us. The flesh is burnt away. Was this flesh beautiful? Did this flesh bear a child? Did this flesh feel loved? Was it accepted? Rejected? Respected? Adored? Despised? It did not matter any more.

All that remained of these three people, and there were three for sure, was ash. The remains that cannot be destroyed. He remembered the language of symbols. This ash running through his fingers was the symbol of the soul.

It suddenly dawned on Yuvanashva that men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters are ultimately nothing but souls wrapped in different types of matter. *He* was nothing but soul wrapped in flesh; an unusual flesh that had created life within itself and outside. Flesh nevertheless. Mortal flesh that enjoyed, suffered, aged and would one day be ash. Within was the soul.

Yuvanashva smeared his body with the ash. Let them see this ash, my soul. Let my flesh be ignored.

Far away, the Angirasa opened their eyes. The youngest one said, 'Yuvanashva has learnt a new language. His vision has expanded. He has started seeing what no one else sees. He is no longer Manava. He has become a Rishi.'

'No, not yet,' said the oldest Angirasa. 'There is wisdom but not enough compassion.'

YUVANESHWAR



Smeared with ash, Yuvanashva lay on the ground, his eyes shut, feeling the heat of the winter sun. 'I am soul wrapped in flesh, nothing more, nothing less,' he kept reminding himself. The knowledge brought him great joy. He realized that his whole life, with all its struggles, triumphs and sufferings, with all those unnatural and miraculous events, was just a series of indicators directing him towards the soul. Nothing else mattered.

Then he opened his eyes and found a hundred hermits hovering around him like bees over a lotus flower. Some were wearing clothes of bark, others were wearing skin, some were naked. Some held sticks, others tridents. All were smeared, like him, with ash. 'They are all Rishis. They should know the truth of

the teachers,' thought Yuvanashva. 'That we are all souls. This wrapping of flesh does not matter.'

But the eyes of the hermits were firmly fixed on the scar on Yuvanashva's left thigh. 'So what did Adi-natha say?' asked one sanyasi eagerly, 'Are you man or woman? Or are you a bit of both?'

'Is your flesh still man enough to hold wisdom?' asked another sanyasi.

And a very disappointed Yuvanashva thought, 'They see only my body not my soul. How dare they smear their bodies with ash? How dare they call themselves Rishis? They are still Manavas, fettered to the flesh.'

A feeling of superiority quietly enveloped Yuvanashva. He had entered the forest later than them but he had moved far ahead. He had found the teacher of teachers. He had unravelled the greatest secret of life.

Suddenly he heard someone speak words that stung him like a poisoned dart. 'You are no Rishi, Yuvanashva. Not yet. You too are fettered. Not by flesh, maybe. But by your desire to be Mandhata's mother. Don't deny it. You have not outgrown that longing. The soul sees all.' All the hermits who crowded around Yuvanashva stood up and turned around to see who had spoken so. Yuvanashva also craned his neck and saw, standing on rocks, behind the crowd of hermits, eight men with long matted hair. The Angirasa! 'Do we not speak the truth, O king of Vallabhi?' asked the youngest-looking of the eight. His questioning eyes bore into Yuvanashva's heart like a thunderbolt.

Yuvanashva, who had bloomed with the wisdom of the Siddhas, withered instantly. 'No. I had just forgotten it.' He started to weep.

The eyes of the Angirasa softened. 'The flesh still matters to you, Yuvanashva, does it not? You, who believe you have transcended your flesh, still long for society to accept that very physical truth.'

Society with all its man-made rules and artificial hierarchy still mattered to him, Yuvanashva realized. He still valued people's opinions. 'I am still Manava,' said Yuvanashva softly, his head bent, his voice barely audible.

'We all are,' said the oldest Angirasa, spreading out his arms. 'Fettered by the flesh, yearning for the soul, struggling with the demands of society. You took your time to make sense of your life. Now let them take theirs. Be patient. Every tree bears fruit eventually.'

‘And until then?’ Yuvanashva blurted out, ‘How long must I wait? When will my son Mandhata accept that I am his mother? When will my family accept the truth of my life? When will Vallabhi stop laughing?’

Yuvanashva began to cry. The wind stilled. All sounds vanished. Nothing could be heard. Not the rustle of leaves nor the chirping of birds. Only Yuvanashva’s heart-wrenching cry. He let out a wail, in a voice of deep agony, of a creature yearning for accommodation and validation.

When Yuvanashva calmed down, the Angirasa spoke. ‘Look at the world around you, Yuvanashva. It is full of myriad creatures. Different types of plants and different types of animals. Not all fruits are sweet. Not all minerals glow in the dark. There will always be those like Mandhata in whom you will evoke discomfort, because you will shatter their certainties. In retaliation they will attack you or pretend you don’t exist. Then there will be those like Jayanta, who don’t want to make sense out of you. They love you for whatever you are.’

‘Why can’t everybody be at least like Jayanta?’ Then he paused, ‘No, I want more. Understanding and acceptance.’

‘When that happens, the world will lose its purpose and cease to be. The world exists only to make us wise. Ignorance fuels pain and from pain comes our search for wisdom. Give it time, Yuvanashva. Eventually, everyone will become a Chakra-varti.’

Yuvanashva wiped his tears, and noticed that the sky above was a brilliant blue. The earth below was a brilliant red. Golden sunlight bounced off every leaf.

‘Will you let us worship you, Yuvanashva?’ asked the Angirasa.

‘What?’

‘Will you let us worship you, Yuvanashva?’ repeated the Angirasa.

‘Worship me? Why?’

‘Because you are the pregnant king. The greatest riddle of the sixty-four Yoginis. Why do you exist, they ask. You confound us. You confuse us. You remind us that what is impossible in the mind of man is possible in the mind of God. Vallabhi may reject you, but we will worship you. You will be our Adinatha, our teacher of teachers. We shall address you as Nilakantha Bhairavi.’

‘Why Nilakantha?’

‘Because like Shiva, your throat is blue with a truth that threatens our sense of order. With compassion you withhold it and suffer it, until we are wise enough to receive it.’

‘You equate my truth with poison?’

‘The truth is not poison. It is our inability to handle it that makes it poisonous.’

‘Why Bhairavi?’

‘Because you terrify us with the infinite possibilities of the world. Tell us there is always something we do not know. You demand that we widen our vision and our vocabulary, so that we make room for all, and are frightened of nothing.’

The Angirasa then led Yuvanashva by his hand and made him sit on a great black rock under a banyan tree. Behind the tree was a vast waterfall. They spread a tiger skin on it. ‘Sit,’ they said. Yuvanashva sat down.

The hermits collected water from the river in their gourds. This water was poured over Yuvanashva. The Angirasa then sprinkled turmeric and vermilion powder on him. It fell on him like a shower of gold dust and sacrificial blood. They garlanded him with strings of red and white flowers. Then the hundred ascetics and the eight Angirasa lit lamps on leaves and waved them around Yuvanashva.

‘Nilakantha Bhairavi, we salute you,’ said the Angirasa touching their heads to the floor.

‘Yuvaneshwar, we salute you,’ said the hermits bowing their heads.

Tears of joy rolled down Yuvanashva’s eyes. I am both. I am the terrifying embodiment of society’s unspoken truth. I am also yet another of nature’s delightful surprises. I am the soul. I am also the flesh. This is who I am.

Amidst the circle of waving lamps, Yuvanashva had a vision of Ileshwara stretched out between the earth and sky, bedecked in all fourteen symbols of manhood and all fourteen symbols of womanhood. This was the ancestor who understood his particular pain. This was the divinity who understood everyone’s pain. His lips were curled in a tender smile. Her eyes were full of affection. The glance had only inclusions, no exclusions. Total understanding. Unconditional liberating love.

Epilogue



Hundreds of priests gathered on the banks of the Kalindi, their heads tonsured, their faces grim. It was the last day of the waning moon in the third month of the monsoons. The day when the land of the living was closest to the land of the dead. The day when every man pays his respects to his forefathers and renews his annual promise to rotate the cycle of life.

The crows waited patiently on behalf of the ancestors for the sons to arrive.

The Brahmanas had been busy all night. Senior priests updated the family tree of the households they served: the births and deaths that had happened in the last year. Junior priests organized the ingredients of the ritual: plantain leaves, black sesame seeds, rice cakes.

First the priests invoked their own ancestors. This happened before dawn. By first light they were ready to receive their Kshatriya patrons. Ceremonies for farmers, herdsmen, craftsmen and merchants were planned later in the day. For the rest, a collective ceremony was organized at the end of the day. The rituals continued at night for those whose names had been forgotten and for those who had left no offspring behind. Due attention was given to each and every ancestor of Vallabhi.

As the sun rose, the river bank was crowded with men belonging to warrior clans, all with tonsured heads, all dressed in simple white dhotis, sitting in small groups while their priest on their behalf invoked and offered oblations first to the gods who live in the sky, then to the demons who live under the earth, then to the spirits in between who protect the family, the home, the clan, the village, the earth, and finally to the ancestors. The chanting lacked melody and was occasionally interrupted by the wail of men who remembered their fathers.

The sky was grey. Even the trees, washed clean, bent their branches as if in mourning.

The barber had arrived at the palace at the crack of dawn. As he produced the gold razor, reserved for royalty, Mandhata protested, 'But my father still lives. My mothers are not widows yet.'

Simantini, who had given up all solid food since her husband's departure, replied, 'It is the way of the Turuvasus. Your father is not physically dead. But he has renounced his role as head of this household and ruler of this kingdom. He has severed all ties with his family. Even given up his name. He is dead as far as society is concerned. Until this fact is ritually acknowledged, you cannot become king.'

'Why did he have to leave, mother?' asked Mandhata.

Like you don't know, thought Pulomi. Keshini started to sob. Simantini looked at Mandhata. How long will we ignore the truth, she wanted to scream. But she controlled herself. Before her sat not the ruthless opportunist but a lonely boy consumed by guilt and shame.

She saw the tears welling up in his eyes. She straightened her back, and said, 'It is inappropriate for members of the royal family to shed tears over the king's decisions and its consequences. This moment is the way it is supposed to be.'

Jayanta sat next to his brother, holding his hands, feeling his guilt. He refused to judge Mandhata. Or be angry with him. Or make pronouncements of how royalty should or should not behave. He let his brother be. He made himself available for comfort and conversation. Whatever was needed to go through this day. He let himself be tonsured too.

The barber had left only a small tuft of hair on top of his head. 'That's to remind you to return to the world of the living. The shaved head to mourn those in the land of the dead.'

The sound of conch-shell trumpets and the sight of red flags announced the arrival of the king. For a brief period it broke the prevailing melancholy. Priests on the river bank rushed through the ceremonies of their patrons so that they could see the king. The patrons did not protest. They too were curious to see the new king conduct his first offering to the ancestors.

Head shaved, dressed in a single piece of cloth, Mandhata walked barefoot to the bend of the river reserved for royal ceremonies. There was no parasol above him. No elder beside him. Only his brother. On this day, he walked not as king, but as a mortal man. A son.

As Mandhata sat down, he felt strange. This was one ceremony where there would be no laughter or music. Only the sound of chants and the cawing of crows. Hundreds of crows. Flying overhead, seated on the fences, swooping down to eat the countless rice balls that lined the river. He felt anxious. He looked around and found his brother standing at a respectful distance, along with other members of the royal family and his curious subjects. The public spectacle of mourning made him uncomfortable. But it had to be done. With a gesture, he asked Jayanta to sit next to him. He could not go through the ceremony alone.

Plantain leaves were spread out before Mandhata— vertically not horizontally. His sacred thread was shifted so that it hung from his right shoulder not left. He was told to consecrate the food by pouring water from the wrong side of his palm. ‘While we respect our ancestors, at no point must we let them feel too welcome, lest they become ghosts and haunt our land,’ said the senior priest whose family had served the royal house for centuries.

Mandhata faced south. Far beyond the horizon the ancestors lived in a world that was all upside down. But Yuvanashva was not there. He walked on the northern hills known by his new name—Nilakantha Bhairavi.

A strange name. Nilakantha Bhairavi. The blue-necked god who evokes fear. Shiva’s name after he drank poison. Is that what he called the magic potion? Poison? Did he feel he was a monster after the poison changed him forever? A freak who frightens all? Mandhata felt the guilt returning. When the truth was revealed, he had rejected Yuvanashva, turned away from the truth. Yes, at that moment, Yuvanashva was Bhairavi, an ugly truth he did not want to face.

‘Your father’s name?’ asked the priest. This was a ritual question. The ritual demanded an answer. For in speaking the name, the dead were remembered. And in being remembered, they come alive.

‘What?’ Mandhata was shaken out of his thoughts.

‘Your father’s name?’ repeated the priest. Mandhata saw the plantain leaves before him, placed vertically. His mind returned to the ceremony. What was that question again? Father’s name?

Mandhata remembered his last real conversation with his father. ‘I gave you birth, son. I nursed you.’ Mandhata remembered his shock. His revulsion. Why did his father have to say it and make it real? The whole scene was so melodramatic, so surreal. Why could his father not be mature about it? Just keep

silent. Let things be. As they were. Move on. But then, he was not a father.

‘There is no one here. Just you and me. Will you, just once, just this once, call me “mother”? Just once. I so long to hear it.’

‘My king, your father’s name?’ the priest repeated a third time, a little louder, but careful to hide his impatience.

Mandhata could not respond. The poison of deceit could not be swallowed. It could not be spat out either. It burned the throat. Like acid. Truth is that which is uttered. Mandhata could not reply. He did not know the answer. A tear rolled down his cheek.

Embarrassed, the priest looked away and pretended he had heard the answer, ‘Yuvanashva. We invoke you. Yuvanashva’s father, Prasenajit. We invoke you. Prasenajit’s father, Pruthalashva. We invoke you. We invoke all the ancestors who walked the earth before the father, the grandfather and the great grandfather, all those whose names have been forgotten. May Mandhata’s offering please all. He renews his vow to repay his debt, to father sons, to bring his Pitrs back, to follow the footsteps of all the men before him.’

Jayanta saw the tear. He heard his brother’s silence. In that silence he heard Mandhata acknowledge Yuvanashva for the first time, perhaps the only time, as his mother.

Jayanta wept.

He wept for his family, his mothers, his brother and for his grandmother, the venerable Shilavati, and for all the pain and suffering that we endure to maintain a façade of order.

He wept for his father, the pregnant king, for the imperfection of the human condition, and for our stubborn refusal to make room for all those in between.



Author's Note

*And then it begins
The search
For the fifth head of Brahma
His first gave us words
His second gave us grammar
His third gave us meter
His fourth gave us melody
The last one is missing
The fifth
The head with meaning*

The story of the pregnant king is recounted twice in the Mahabharata. Once by the sage Lomasha during the exile of the Pandavas. And the second time by the poet Vyasa during the war with the Kauravas. The story is also retold in several Puranas, each with its own unique twist. Why does this bizarre tale exist, I have wondered. What function does it serve in the sacred chronicles?

Typically the tale belongs to an earlier era, pre-dating the battle at Kurukshetra by many generations. Not so in my book.

This book is a deliberate distortion of tales in the epics. History has been folded, geography crumpled. Here, Yuvanashva is a contemporary of the Pandavas who engages Arjuna in a dialogue.

There are new characters like Yuvanashva's mother, Mandhata's brother and Shikhandi's daughter. None of these have any scriptural basis. They have been churned out of my imagination as I have tried to weave a tapestry of tales that at the very least delights.

Yes, the classical scriptures do tell the tales of Somvat, Sthunakarna and Shikhandi. Stories of Ayli (called Pramila here), Iravan and Bahuchari (called Bahugami here) are part of the rural and hijra traditions of Tamil Nadu and

Gujarat. But I have let these only inspire, not limit, me. I have even taken the liberty of coalescing the story of Ila and Bhangashvana into one.

The book is full of hymns, chants, rituals, spells, speculations, philosophies and ancient codes of conduct. These must not be taken as authentic as my intention is not to recreate reality but to represent thought processes.

At the end of my yagna, after long deliberations with many gods and demons, I find myself holding a pot: the narrative. Within the pot is a potion: a concoction of ideas, thoughts and feelings.

My patron, the Yajamana, can admire the pot. Or break it. Drink the potion. Or spit it out. Or she may ask, as I often do, what matters more: the pot or the potion?

Did the events actually happen? Does it matter? Is it really about Shilavati, Yuvanashva, Shikhandi or Somvati? Or is it about love, law, identity, gender, power and wisdom? The impossibility of universal fairness? Who knows?

Within infinite myths lies the eternal truth

Who sees it all?

Varuna has but a thousand eyes

Indra a hundred

And I, only two

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